



HAZURE SKILL

THE GUILD MEMBER WITH
A **WORTHLESS SKILL** IS ACTUALLY
A **LEGENDARY ASSASSIN**

Kennoji

ILLUSTRATION BY
KWKM

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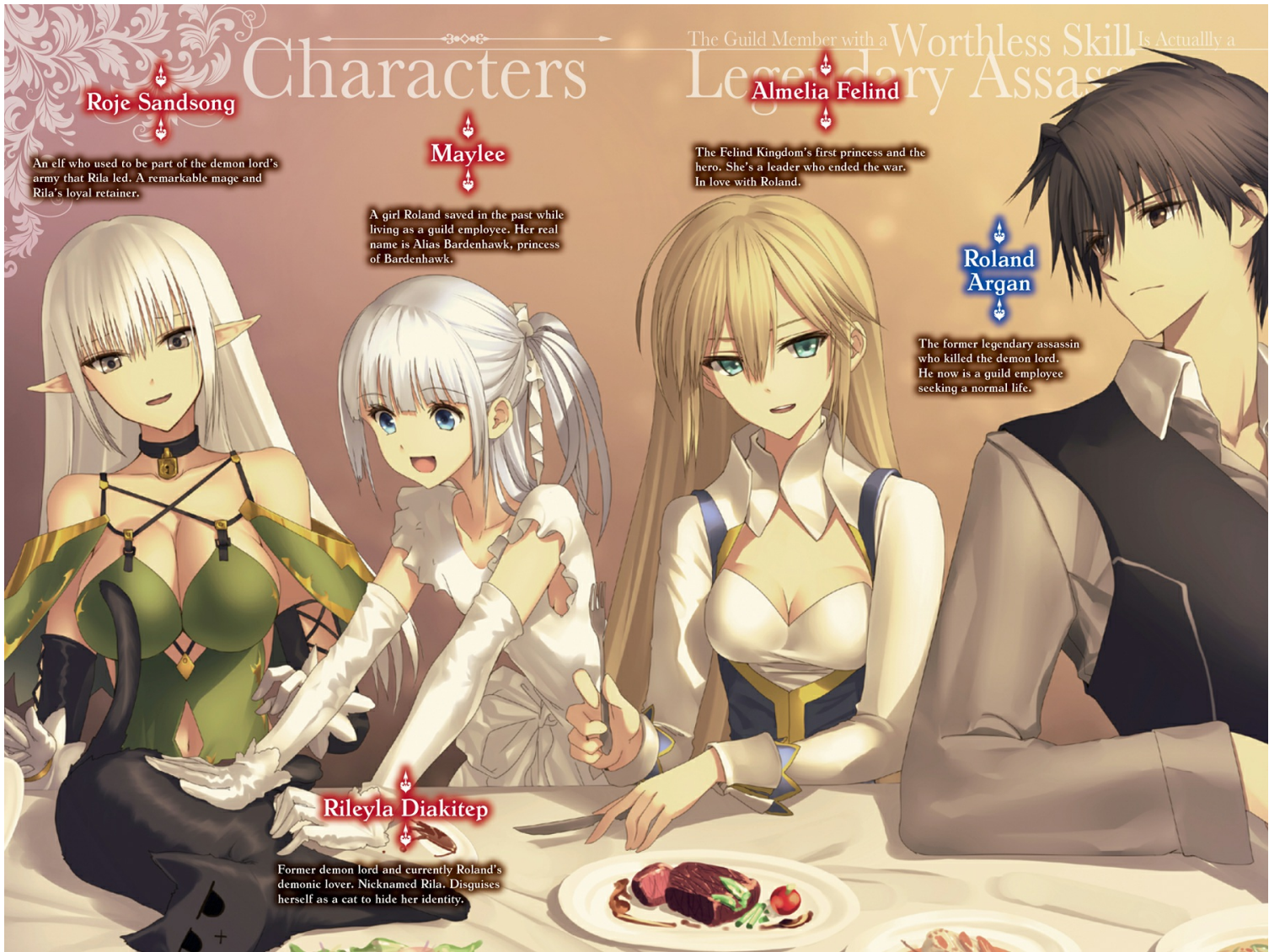
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Characters

The Guild Member with a Worthless Skill Is Actually a
Legendary Assassin

Roje Sandsong

An elf who used to be part of the demon lord's army that Rila led. A remarkable mage and Rila's loyal retainer.

Maylee

A girl Roland saved in the past while living as a guild employee. Her real name is Alias Bardenhawk, princess of Bardenhawk.

Almelia Felind

The Felind Kingdom's first princess and the hero. She's a leader who ended the war. In love with Roland.

Roland Argan

The former legendary assassin who killed the demon lord. He now is a guild employee seeking a normal life.

Rileyla Diakitep

Former demon lord and currently Roland's demonic lover. Nicknamed Rila. Disguises herself as a cat to hide her identity.



“...It’s been a
while, Amy.
How did you
like using
Unobtrusive?”

“It’s a loser
skill—a big
old loser.”

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New York

Copyright

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Vol. 5

Kennoji

Translation by Jan Mitsuko Cash

Cover art by KWKM

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HAZURE SKILL “KAGE GA USUI” WO MOTSU GUILD SHOKUIN GA, JITSU WA DENSETSU NO
ANSATSUSHA Vol. 5

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CONTENTS

Cover

Insert

Title Page

Copyright

1. The Underground Guild's Seedy Adventurers
2. Bounty
3. A Rookie Adventurer and a Brief Look into Daily Life, Part I
4. A Rookie Adventurer and a Brief Look into Daily Life, Part II
5. Infiltration
6. The Sandor Incident and the Unstoppable Specter
7. An Impending Reunion, Part I
8. An Impending Reunion, Part II
9. The Greatest Skill in the World
10. Return

Afterword

Yen Newsletter

CONTENTS

- 1 | **The Underground Guild's Seedy Adventurers**
- 2 | **Bounty**
- 3 | **A Rookie Adventurer and a Brief Look into Daily Life, Part I**
- 4 | **A Rookie Adventurer and a Brief Look into Daily Life, Part II**
- 5 | **Infiltration**
- 6 | **The Sandor Incident and the Unstoppable Specter**
- 7 | **An Impending Reunion, Part I**
- 8 | **An Impending Reunion, Part II**
- 9 | **The Greatest Skill in the World**
- 10 | **Return**
- | *Afterword*

1

The Underground Guild's Seedy Adventurers

Someone dashed over to me, making a racket.

"Roland! It's morning!" Maylee opened the door without so much as a knock.

"Maylee," I scolded, "you're supposed to say 'good morning' at this time of day. That's what *normal* people do."

Behind her were the four women who comprised the pretty girl squad, still on their bodyguarding quest, and still half asleep.

I'd taken on the responsibility of setting up an Adventurers Guild in the Duchy of Bardenhawk. As a result, I'd been invited there as a guest and was living in the castle as part of my new appointment.

The adventurers accompanying Maylee greeted me, and I returned the pleasantries. Though a bit delayed, the elf Roje and her master, Rila, in her black cat form, came calling. They peeked into my room.

"No changes?" I asked.

"I think that's plain to see," Roje answered flatly.

While the Duchy of Bardenhawk worked to rebuild, the Welger Company schemed in the shadows. From what I'd gathered, it seemed they aimed to take control of the parliament to create a puppet nation. They'd even attempted to kidnap Maylee. I was glad I'd started collecting intel on the company in advance. The situation would have been even worse had I neglected to be vigilant.

The Welger Company had used some of its men for the kidnapping plot, but they'd also hired a professional. The former could be ignored, but the hired man had been another story. He'd gotten the job through an establishment called the "underground guild."

The professional I'd fought—his name was Victor—possessed a particularly tricky skill. And another hired specialist Rila encountered had seen through her cat guise immediately. Evidently, this underground guild employed people more capable than most.

Considering the situation, we'd decided that little Maylee, the novice adventurer, would be spending her days studying in the castle until further notice.

"Roland, are you going to work again?" Maylee asked.

"Yes," I answered, then added, "And I'll be late today."

Maylee gave me a dissatisfied pout.

"It's just for a little longer," I assured her.

I wasn't about to let some no-name enterprise set up camp in the same country where Maylee lived. If the Welger Company and this underground guild had any significant ties to each other, I'd need to root them out. Thankfully, Victor had confessed how to reach the underground guild.

"Maylee, breakfast is almost ready. Let's head to the dining hall," Roje suggested, to which Maylee responded by reluctantly shuffling out of the room.

"I do believe you only recently claimed your work here was beginning to settle down," Rila said as she leaped onto the bed. I realized this was her way of asking why I would be late.

"I'm thinking of taking a trip to the underground guild," I explained. "I should be able to discover the Welger Company's next moves."

"I see," Rila replied.

Something else was also weighing on my mind. The guild master, Tallow, had told me he'd seen my old teacher. I was dubious it was truly her, and even if it had been, she'd likely departed the country by now. There was little point to dwelling on the idea.

And I'd managed to convince myself of that until...

...I saw Victor's corpse.

“Let us take our leave, as well,” Rila told me. “Make haste, before the lavish feast cools.”

“All right,” I replied. Then I left the room.

Amy. Where are you? And what are you up to?

I could only pray I’d never cross paths with her again.



After I finished work, I headed to a bar on the outskirts of Izaria, the capital.

I removed the fake glasses I wore for work and ran my hands through my hair. I’d changed into a plainer outfit, too.

The place was already filled with customers. Men nursed their cheap ales, youths laughed raucously, and a lascivious-looking woman cast me a sidelong glance. I paid her no heed.

“Welcome. What’ll it be?” the shopkeeper asked when I took a seat at the counter.

“Is there anything you recommend?”

“Guess that’d be the wine. Been popular to have it warmed up nowadays.”

“Then I suppose I’ll have milk,” I answered.

“...”

The man gave me a knowing glance as he poured me a glass of milk.

A scrap of paper sat at the bottom of the glass.

“Sir, the lavatory’s thataway,” he said.

“Right, thank you,” I replied.

Things had gone precisely as I’d been told.

According to Victor—the man I’d fought when the fake Maylee was kidnapped—the bathroom had a secret passage.

After emptying my glass, I opened the folded bit of paper. The numbers four,

five, and one were written on it.

I left my seat, and my payment, at the counter.

There were two stalls in the lavatory. One was unopenable, as though locked. I knocked in the rhythm indicated on the little note, and the door clicked open lightly. Undoubtedly this was a type of magic that reacted to sound—perhaps even a type of boundary spell.

Beyond the door was a set of stairs, and as I entered, I heard the distinctive *click* of the lock behind me. I moved down the steps in darkness for a while. Eventually, I came to another door that led to a large chamber.

Several seedy-looking men were imbibing while eyeing sheets of paper stuck to the walls. One shook his head while another claimed a page and headed who knows where. Those sheets were likely this place's version of quest stubs.

"You're a new face. First time?" a middle-aged man with crooked teeth asked me. His breath smelled of liquor.

"Yes, Victor, may his soul rest in peace, clued me in," I replied.

"...He did, eh?"

It seemed Victor was well-known in this community. According to him, the only way to get to this room was through introduction. Considering this place had a secret pass code, that wasn't too surprising.

"He explained things to me, so you don't need to worry," I said.

"Did he, now?"

I surveyed the room, glancing at a few of the flyers on the wall. Murder, theft, kidnapping, fraud, poaching, spying... Each job fit into one or more of those categories. Clients' names were never listed. The only information provided was the reward, details about the task, and how many people it needed. Underground guild, indeed. The postings really did resemble quest stubs.

"Taken an interest in that one, mister?"

"Not particularly... Who arranges these quests?"

"Arranges 'em? Dunno. Don't care. All's we do is get the jobs on the walls

done and claim our pay. That's it."

There had to be someone behind the organization. A guild master, perhaps, pulling the strings of this behind-the-scenes organization. Clearly, the adventurers didn't know who it was, though.

"Looks like you don't understand as much as you thought, huh, mister? How 'bout I show ya."

The middle-aged man seemed rather friendly. People like him often wound up dead, but I hoped he'd survive to live another day.

He pointed to a different posting.

"How 'bout this one? 'Assassination of Maritime King,' eh?"

Evidently, they wanted King Bescoda killed. He was well-known in the Felind Kingdom for his seafaring enterprise.

And the reward was a cool five million.

"It does say up to two people," I answered.

"Whatcha think, mister? You interested in pairin' up?"

Victor had told me many things, but he hadn't had a chance to inform me of all the underground guild's workings. Thus, I decided to take the middle-aged man up on the offer—just this once.

"That sounds like a good idea," I answered.

"Then it's settled." The man tore the sheet off the wall and headed deeper into the room. "Right, haven't introduced myself. I'm Vicks. Nice ter meetcha."

"I look forward to working with you, Vicks. I'm... Well, we'll say my name is Slade."

"Slade, huh? Fine name. Lookin' forward to this, too."

We shook hands and headed for one of the private rooms in the complex. Apparently, a guild employee would give us details there.

A rough-looking man appeared and sat down—heavily—across from us.

"Hey, Vicks. How've you been?" he greeted.

“Been gettin’ along. This here’s Slade. Victor made the introduction.”

The employee pinned a glare on me. “Oh? Victor, you say...”

“You both seemed surprised,” I remarked. “Something wrong?”

“Guess you wouldn’t know since you’re a rookie, but this place only allows the best. Anybody bringing in someone new risks their rep.”

Vicks added, “Yeah. Invite somebody who can’t hold their own, and you can ruin your own cred. So what you do doesn’t just affect *you*. It could hurt the guy who brought you in. But recruiting someone useful will increase your cred since it shows you’ve got good connections. Well, Victor’s dead, so not like it’s going to do him any good.”

“He was way up there, but he never invited anyone or told a soul about this place until now. Couldn’t stand the guy, but his abilities were top rate.”

So, Victor *had* been a top adventurer at this shadowy guild. Considering his skill, it wasn’t at all surprising. It was too bad he was gone. He would have been useful, even if he’d continued to operate in the underground guild.

“Victor did say that someone had beaten his skill for the first time the day before he died...,” the guild employee remarked.

“I heard about that, too,” Vicks replied. “Sure would like to know how someone got through Invincible. Can’t even imagine how they’d do it.”

“Wait a sec... Your name’s Slade, right? Were you the one?” the employee questioned.

Vicks also seemed interested in my answer because he stared at me with deep curiosity. If I told them they’d guessed correctly, there was a possibility I’d be pinned with Victor’s murder.

“Slade, it’s all right. Even if you killed Victor, we wouldn’t blame you for it. Actually, that’d be great for your standing.”

This place was exactly what I’d expected. Killing someone powerful boosted your value.

“I wasn’t the one who did it,” I corrected them. “But I did find a way around his skill before he passed.”

“Whooaaa...! That must’ve been why Victor told you how to get here.”

“Didn’t think you had that in you, Slade,” Vicks remarked. “Maybe I’ve got an eye for people, callin’ you over as I did.”

The looks in their eyes had changed. Now they viewed me with a kind of awe.

“Anyway, let’s get back to business. You and Vicks are here to accept the quest for the Assassination of the Maritime King, is that right?” the employee said.

Vicks and I both nodded together.

“May I ask something?” I inquired.

“What’s that?”

“I see that the reward is five million. Don’t you think that’s rather low?”

“What?” The threat was plain in the guild employee’s low tone.

Vicks poked the man with his elbow. “C’mon now.” Then he said to me, “Slade, this is a pretty high reward, all things considered.”

Despite the middle-aged man’s cautioning, I pressed the matter.

“The maritime king, Bescoda, is known far and wide... An assassin doesn’t simply eliminate the target. Pay should reflect the impact on society after the mark is gone. This reward is disproportionately low, and it’s paid upon completion. After accounting for the expenses and that we’ll be splitting the money, there will hardly be two million left. And that’s if we’re lucky.”

BAM. The employee struck the table as he stood from his seat. Apparently, I’d hit a nerve.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself, rookie.”

“Sit. We can’t discuss the matter like this.”

I adjusted my tone and met the guild employee’s eyes. I realized he was frightened.

“...Guh.” He went silent and slunk back into his seat. Evidently, he’d glimpsed my hostility. I returned to my original tone and explained it again.

“We risk our lives in this line of work, so I cannot make any compromises. But I won’t ask for anything unreasonable, either. Three million up front and seven upon completion. This is my first gig in this place, so how does that sound?”

“...I’ll ask. Just wait here.” The guild employee took the quest sheet and left.

“You’ve gone too far, Slade... I thought we were goners... I’ve never seen anybody try hagglin’ over the reward...”

“Well, I believe it’s plain to see that compensation is too low,” I replied.

“Plain to see?” Vicks repeated.

“Yes, it’s much lower than the market rate. That’s what I mean.”

“Market rate... Wait, you’ve done this kinda thing before?”

“After seeing the other rewards, it’s obvious someone is skimming from the top, and not just from this job, either,” I replied, refusing to answer directly.

Had I been requested to assassinate the maritime king while I’d still been a true assassin, I likely wouldn’t have taken the job for less than a hundred million. That was how great of an impact the king’s death would have on society at large. Undoubtedly, someone would profit from his absence, and knowing that, this reward was much too low.

The employee returned almost immediately. He looked unconvinced while lowering himself into a seat.

“Slade, we’ve accepted your request. An advance of three mil...” He set down three piles of banknotes, still bundled in thin strips of paper.

“Whoa!” Vicks couldn’t help but exclaim. He seemed impressed.

“And upon completion, another seven mil. All because Victor referred you. But you know what happens if you flop or run, don’t ya?”

“Naturally,” I replied.

Once we’d accepted the quest, Vicks and I left the guild. The entrance and the exit to the underground lair were separate, so we departed via an entirely different route. When we opened the door, I found it led to an abandoned house in the slums.

“Slade, you any good at snuffin’ people?” Vicks asked.

“More or less. What types of quests do you usually take?”

“Any, really, but where I shine is at gatherin’ intel. I’m not anythin’ to write home about, but I’m sure good at bein’ reliable.”

I didn’t care what he was good at or who he was. I simply needed someone to teach me how to accept quests, get the reward, and about any of the underground guild’s unspoken rules.

Still, intel gathering... That was more useful than I’d expected.

When I asked Vicks more about it, he revealed he also specialized in agitating the populace and spreading rumors to upset his targets. With clear pride, he admitted, “That was actually my primary work back in the day.” I had no desire to hear the specifics, so I didn’t press for details.

If I wanted, I could end this job by taking care of the target alone. However, I might need Vicks in the future. A man who’d take on any task for money would be handy. So I decided this would be an excellent opportunity to assess him.

“First, let’s get a sense of where the maritime king is and what he does in his day-to-day,” I said.

“Uh-huh,” Vicks agreed.

I was rather surprised he listened so willingly to a newcomer.

“I’m good at intel, but that means I make for a terrible murderer. So I was thinkin’ that I should follow your lead, seein’ as how killin’ is your specialty.”

Basically, he didn’t want to step on my toes because he believed me to be a skilled assassin.

After that, I gave Vicks detailed instructions. It seemed he was a real pro. If he knew something would be difficult, he said so immediately, which made the conversation all the more constructive.

“Slade, if it weren’t for you, I would’ve taken the reward as is. I’ll help ya out as much as I can.”

“The feeling’s mutual,” I replied.

We kept our discussion to necessary topics going forward. Although Vicks was in a different line of work, he was definitely a veteran. I found the efficiency of our communication reassuring.

“We haven’t gotta split it evenly. All I need is one mil for gettin’ things prepped. That’s more’n enough for me. I’ll figure out what that cruddy maritime king’s up to. I’ll even learn which women he beds.”

After we decided upon a rendezvous point, one roll of banknotes disappeared into Vicks’s breast pocket, and he left the abandoned house.

I’d never collaborated on a kill with anyone before. Had I known someone this proficient at preliminary research, my jobs would’ve surely gone much smoother.

After a week, Vicks returned to the abandoned house in the slums we’d designated as our meeting place.

“Got a whole lotta info, I did.” He launched right into the meat of things without a greeting.

Very sensible. I liked that. There was no need to ask who he was talking about.

“So, his daily rhythm, his patterns, who he associates with...”

“I got ’em all,” he said.

Vicks produced papers and cloth, all covered in notes. Examining them, I realized they were numbers, a cipher.

“You’ve assigned integers to various sounds,” I observed.

Though the notes appeared to be an amalgamation of random numbers, I decoded them swiftly once I understood the trick. Vicks looked at me in surprise.

“Can’t believe it took you only a second to understand that. Heh-heh. Don’t you go solvin’ my ciphers too quickly. I’ll start to worry someone else might do the same.”

He smiled, though wanly, as he relayed all the information he’d collected.

“His real name: Bescoda Loot. Forty-three. Single. Five lovers. Guy pretty much switches off each night.”

Although Bescoda appeared to be a lecher, he was an industrious sort who kept to the same pattern from day to day.

“That makes things much easier for me,” I said.

Vicks showed me a map of Bescoda’s residence and various points he’d noted. The map covered about 70 percent of the building. Nothing in Vick’s account surprised me, and his information contained no contradictions. It didn’t seem like he was lying.

He even took care when responding to my inquiries.

“When it comes time to enter, I’ll operate alone—”

“Actually, I bought out some guards. I should be able to get you a path clear to his bedroom if you bring me along the day of.”

“Moving together will increase the risk. If those you bribed turn on you, we’ll be in trouble,” I countered.

“I—I guess ya got a point.”

Vicks continued talking while I charted several entry and exit routes. Once we’d picked a day, we parted ways.

Having someone else do all the research was convenient, but I had a nagging feeling I needed to look into things myself. Perhaps that owed to my days as a proper assassin, when I’d done everything alone.

However, I’d trusted that Vicks was a professional and given him the responsibility, so I elected to stay put and believe he’d done good work.



On the night of the job, Vicks and I met in the town where Bescoda lived. As we walked the quiet streets in the dark, we came upon the palatial residence, inconspicuously standing there on the road.

“That’s it.”

It was exactly as Vicks had described on his map. He even was more useful than I'd given him credit for.

"I've arranged for the guards to turn the other way tonight."

"I don't intend on allowing them to see me, but noted."

"I'll wait for your signal to enter."

I nodded, then used the route we'd planned to scale the tall wall with no tools. Once over, I landed silently in a garden. Sticking to shadows cast by the moon, I moved closer to the building. And that's when something unexpected occurred.

The entire garden flashed, and mana rings appeared abruptly, targeting me. Cords clamped down on my arms and legs, forming into magical restraints. I remained silent as men with weapons shuffled out and surrounded me. Vicks, who'd told me he would await my signal, walked right through the front gate.

"Hmph. So that's what this is," I remarked. Vicks had tricked me.

"Like I said, I bribed 'em. Still...I'm impressed you're keepin' so calm. Who the heck are you?"

"Considering the situation, does it matter? That's not what's important right now. What are you after? My cut?"

"That's right. What *else* would I want?" Vicks replied.

In a way, this was also an expression of his professionalism, albeit of a different kind. Considering the situation, I realized this would make killing him much easier.

The guardsmen shouted as they drew their swords.

"*Dispell.*" I invoked demonic purification magic to free myself.

"What?!"

Too late. Too slow.

I looked each of the guards in the eyes, giving them just enough time to register the surprise.

"If you intend to attack all at once, you should distribute yourselves according

to the length of your blades.”

I took one of their swords and slashed one of them across the shoulder. I dodged the spray of blood and struck with the blade again. The second man who attacked me lost his arms while still holding his weapon. Time away from my old line of work hadn't dulled my combat skills.

I heard someone shout from behind me.

“Hragh!”

“I understand that you meant to work yourself up to attack,” I commented, “but all you did was reveal yourself.”

I turned and flung the sword, piercing the charging guard straight through his face. My foe fell over backward.

“G-get him! What do you think you're doin'?!“ Vicks was shouting. “He's just one man! Five hundred thou for whoever kills the guy!”

It seemed he'd intended to kill the target using these guards.

The promise of money had apparently been a strong draw. Four more men came to attack me. I killed each of them one at a time without hesitation. Heart pierced, beheaded, throat slashed, and the last was sliced straight through his chest. Before I knew it, the garden was a bloodbath. The fight ended in less than two minutes, and Vicks and I were the only ones left standing.

“B-but how...? You even dodged all the blood...”

“Naturally. I couldn't return home all dirty.” I held a corpse down with my foot as I pulled a sword from it. “Something felt off about you agreeing with everything I said. Now I know why. I suppose it's true that trust makes for easy profit.”

“W-wait... I-I'll split the share with you fifty-fifty...! Yeah? That's what you want, right?”

“I never decided to engage in this work for the money.”

I'd only demanded an increase in the fee because the paltry sum they'd been paying for assassination work had irked me on principle.

“All of it—you can have all of it! J-just let me go!” Vicks screamed.

The sword flashed. The crimson-stained blade glinted in the moonlight.

Vicks’s severed head flew through the air and landed on the ground. His headless body collapsed soon after like a lifeless puppet.

“I’m slightly behind now,” I said to myself.

The unexpected scuffle didn’t delay my work that much. Everything was resolved within the time I budgeted for a margin of error.

I often expected the unexpected.

Just as I’d planned, I headed to Bescoda’s chambers. I must have killed all of his guards in the earlier fight, because I sensed none of them inside. Once I reached Bescoda’s room, I kicked down his locked door. He must have heard the commotion outside, because he had a sword drawn when I entered. He stood by his bed, still wearing sleep attire.

Now to discuss my true reason for coming.

“Who are you?” the king demanded.

“I’m here to save you,” I replied.

“What? Where are my guards...?”

“They were bribed. You ought to hire people less easily swayed by quick money next time—if there is a next time, that is.”

I raised both my hands to show I meant no ill will. Bescoda didn’t seem receptive, however, and I sensed that he was still suspicious of me.

“What do you mean you’re here to save me?” he demanded.

“One of your ‘friends’ seeks to end your life,” I explained. “Any idea who?”

I saw the doubt in his eyes. Bescoda still believed I was the one sent to kill him. The corner of my mouth twitched up in a grin.

“It’s a long story,” I told him before explaining the situation.

I’d learned that the Welger Company had some connection with the underground guild. My goal was to discover whether the Welger Company was

a front for the guild or simply employing it.

“I see...,” Bescoda finally muttered. “I do know of the Welger Company, and I’d suspected they were up to something nefarious, but I hadn’t imagined them to be involved in anything like that...”

“The company plans on turning Bardenhawk’s parliament into a puppet government. I learned that the underground guild was helping, so I accepted one of its quests to investigate how the two are connected. That’s why I have no intention of harming you.”

I had no idea who was issuing jobs to the underground guild, but I did know that Bescoda worked in maritime trade. I suspected this was somehow relevant to the Welger Company’s next job.

Bescoda returned his sword to its sheath, then sat on the bed.

“The Welger Company’s master proposed a trade alliance with me two months ago. However, the ‘alliance’ existed in name only. The real intention was to buy me out. The contract was wholly one-sided, and it was hardly a fair deal. I rejected it, naturally. That’s the only thing that comes to mind.”

“Are there any others who hold a grudge against you? I hear you have several lovers.”

“You know of that?” Bescoda questioned with a low chuckle. “I doubt my mistresses would resort to such circuitous methods. They could just as easily stab me with a knife if they desired.”

“Then you think the Welger Company requested your assassination...” I trailed off.

“So what do you intend to do with me?” Bescoda asked. “If nothing is done, another assassin will simply come for my life, I expect.”

“Yes, but only if I tell them I wasn’t successful. I know someone who is very good at disguising people. I’ll have her make up a corpse to resemble you, and then I’ll inform the underground guild that Bescoda Loot is dead.”

The king nodded heartily, convinced by the scheme. “I enjoyed my line of work, but the time has come for a change of vocation... I cannot bring my riches

with me to the afterlife, after all.”

“I’m glad you’re quick to accept what’s happened,” I said.

“Wouldn’t you receive a hefty sum if you were to kill me here?”

“I accept fees commensurate to the jobs,” I answered. “But I’ve never killed simply for money.”

“You frightened me at first. I thought you were the reaper here to claim me, but it seems I’ve met my savior instead.” Bescoda changed out of his nightclothes and packed bags with garments, money, and a knife as he kept talking.

From what I gathered, this assassination request originated from the Welger Company. I suspected the underground guild’s other quests were of similar origin.

I headed back down to the garden and picked a body about the same height and build as Bescoda. After establishing a Gate, I made the jump with Bescoda from our current location to the capital, Izaria. The only person I knew who could disguise a body as someone else’s was a certain elf (who was all bark, no bite, I might add). I headed to the castle with the corpse and Bescoda in tow.

Since being stationed as Maylee’s guard, Roje had taken up residence in the room next to the princess’s.

“You surprise me with a late-night visit...and tidings of a body and an old man?”

Roje greeted me with her usual sour attitude. After promising I would explain later, I had her alter the corpse to resemble Bescoda. Then I sent the king on his way through a Gate connected to Finlan, the capital of the Felind Kingdom. The dead body was deposited in Bescoda’s chambers. All that remained was to report to the underground guild.



Before daybreak, I headed to the underground guild through the same passage in the bar. Since I was going as Slade instead of Roland, I dressed the

same way I had previously.

As I waited in one of the private rooms in the back, the employee I'd met with previously entered and took a seat. He glanced at me and raised a questioning eyebrow.

"What is it this time?"

"I have a report to make," I stated. "I've completed the Assassination of the Maritime King quest."

"I didn't think *you'd* be delivering that news, Slade."

"Meaning?"

"Where's Vicks?"

"Well, I killed him," I replied.

The man belted out a hearty laugh. "I see, so you did... Ha-ha-ha-ha. So the old guy finally met his maker."

When he saw my surprise, he explained between chuckles, "Guy's nickname is Vicks the Backstabber. He's known around here for taking up multi-person quests, turning on his partners, and taking all the money for himself. But as far as we're concerned, betraying folks is just proof of how good you are. We don't care what you do so long as you get the quests done."

"So, he feigns subservience in order to butter his targets up?" I asked.

"Exactly right. He was good at gathering intel, too. But he sure was a nasty sort. Grabbed all the rookies who didn't know the breaks yet and led them to believe he was trustworthy. Newcomers never knew better because they'd never seen his tricks."

That was exactly what Vicks had done with me. The guild employee hadn't mentioned anything to me because this underground guild condoned backstabbing.

"So, someone finally beat him at his own game. Ha-ha-ha-ha!" The man's shoulders heaved as he laughed.

Apparently, someone would be dispatched to ascertain Bescoda's death

before I received my reward. I would only get paid after the confirmation arrived. An elf had cast the disguising magic, so humans were unlikely to discover the truth.

“I wonder who the client was. They must have viewed Bescoda as an obstacle,” I remarked.

“Inquiring about clients is strictly forbidden. You don’t need to know,” the guild employee stated firmly.

This was my first job, and I figured it would be best not to arouse suspicions, so I decided to leave it at that.

“Thanks, Slade,” the employee added.

“What for?”

“Happened ages ago, but Vicks did in one of my buddies.”

Without missing a beat, I responded, “Happens all the time.”

“Yeah, it does. Lots. In this line of work, betrayal’s commonplace...or so I keep telling myself. Honestly, the whole thing doesn’t sit right with me... Kind of feels like my conscience has been cleared.”

Backstabbing, murder, and deceit were encouraged here, yet this man didn’t appear to enjoy those qualities.

I had no other business, so I stood to leave.

“I won’t ask who you are. And I’ll let you know of any good opportunities that pop up. Till next time...Slade.”

Guild staffers had favorite adventurers. I certainly did.

I gave him a demure nod, turned, and departed.

2

Bounty

Days after he'd arranged the underground quest for me and Vicks, the guild employee told me his name was Moyes.

"Hey, Slade," he said.

"Hello."

Moyes took a liking to me after I offed Vicks, who killed his friend. Since then, he'd arranged multiple jobs for me.

He probably wouldn't admit it, but it was obvious he trusted me. Most people involved in this line of work weren't necessarily bad people, despite what their occupations demanded. Moyes was a good example. One's career and personal character didn't have to be intertwined. People fell into these professions to make money, to live—out of necessity more often than not.

"Haven't got many good quests today," Moyes told me.

"Is that right?"

By my standards, the available jobs were on the low-paying side, but they were considered the opposite around here. And, as I'd suspected, each was linked to the Welger Company in some way.

Moyes gave me a quick rundown of one job, then placed the quest sheet on the counter.

"So this one's a basic capture for a bounty... As for this one—"

"A bounty?"

"Yeah. Guess I never did explain it to you. A bounty is placed on a specific person's head, and you receive the reward if you capture or kill them. It's not too different from assassination work, but anyone can kill the mark to claim the

prize.”

“Hmm.”

I didn’t listen to Moyes as he explained, opting to read the quest details myself.

Reward: Forty million

Age: Twenties

Sex: Male

Eyes: Black

Participated in dismantling underground arena

Other information: Goes by many names. Especially likely to use Hamel, Roland, Bjorn, Leon, or Kruger. Possesses skill that conceals him from recognition

From what I gathered, I was the target.

The included sketch was so badly drawn that no one would’ve recognized me even if I hadn’t disguised myself. The client likely had some connection to the underground arena. Whoever used to profit off the place carried quite a grudge against me.

But...how were they aware of my skill? And why did they know I had many names? The identities weren’t guesses. Each one was a name I’d used in the past. And just as the description claimed, they were ones I used regularly.

“ ... ”

“What’s wrong, Slade? Not interested in it?”

I tried to act as naturally as possible while I asked Moyes some questions.

First, I confirmed this was indeed the same underground arena that had taken in Lina, and that the bounty genuinely was for the man who’d destroyed the place. Admittedly, while I’d brought down the operation, I wasn’t responsible for the structure’s annihilation. I’d intended to, though, so I guess the claim wasn’t entirely wrong.

“Dead or alive...,” said Moyes. “You can bring him in either way. Proof you offered him works, too.”

“I see. An underground arena... If I asked, would the client let me visit it?”

“Unfortunately, it’s not in operation anymore.”

Obviously.

“I’ve heard the place is no fun unless you’re a sadist... Seems you’re really interested, eh? Not very like you.” Moyes glanced at me, then collected his documents and tapped them against the table to force them into a pile.

“I only wished to see it. One of my friends met their end in that place...”

I pretended to be pensive, casting my eyes downward. My claim about a friend was true. Lina had almost met a terrible fate in that arena. She likely would have, had I not found her, so I wasn’t actually lying. My vague statement probably led Moyes to think my friend perished, however.

“I see...” Moyes lowered his voice.

“Hearing about the arena again now brought up some old feelings... And the client’s likely the wronged arena manager... If I can, I’d like to get revenge.”

To make the act more believable, I used everything at my disposal: my tone, face, and eyes.

Moyes let out a long sigh as a troubled look crossed his face.

“Well, deceit and murder have value in our world...,” he muttered, tapping the counter with a finger. “I’m just thinking out loud here...”

“Then I’ll be sure not to listen.”

Despite Moyes’s tough-guy act, he was a softie.

“The client is a former aristocrat from Bardenhawk. Ben Amster—a former count.”

Many of the people at the arena were members of the upper class, so hearing that the owner was an aristocrat came as no shock. The Duchy of Bardenhawk was currently assembling a parliament, which meant the nobility would be dismantled. How did this Ben Amster know about me?

I got out of my seat, and Moyes called to me, “Slade, this quest is dangerous. I feel it in my bones. Don’t get too involved.”

I didn’t turn around as I left the guild.



I headed to a countryside town near the Felind Kingdom, in the western part of the Duchy of Bardenhawk. According to Bardenhawk’s queen, Leyte, the former count Ben Amster had managed a fiefdom in the area.

“He’s a very sincere and genial man,” Leyte had told me.

People kept public and private personae, so I couldn’t deny that Ben Amster might have been kind to the queen, at the very least. He genuinely could have seemed like that sort of person. The more Leyte told me, the more I realized she didn’t know anything useful for my objective. I’d wondered if Ben Amster had been a previous underground guild client, but that didn’t seem to be the case.

He lived in the same town he’d previously ruled as count. The arena’s entrance was only two hours by coach from Imil.

When I arrived, a man approached me, looking very friendly. The rural town undoubtedly saw few travelers. We made small talk, and I asked him where I could find the former count.

“Lord Amster lives in the farthest residence down the road,” he offered gladly.

I gave him a small tip, and suddenly, he grew far more loose-lipped about Ben Amster. Like Leyte, he described the former count as genial and sincere. I thanked the man, then followed the directions he’d given me.

The town itself was small, and Ben Amster’s home was much larger than all others around it, making it easy to spot. Based on the facade and the architecture of the building, I wouldn’t have any trouble sneaking in. When I spotted the count’s chambers, I also sensed three odd presences. They were likely the guards.

“...”

They were presumably trying to remain inconspicuous. I understood their capabilities from that alone.

I invoked my skill and took off, leaping up the outer wall in one bound. In the blink of an eye, I snuck into the residence without the guards noticing. I caught one person who looked like a guard heading down the hallway. He seemed like someone the man I'd run into on the road had described.

His back was entirely unguarded. I snuck behind him with ease and took the knife he had concealed on his person. My hand slipped over his nose and mouth from behind—and by the time he realized what was happening, it was too late. The knife pierced his heart.

Once I confirmed the guard was dead, I took the corpse to another room. Searching it revealed that he worked as an assassin.

“You shouldn't *hide* who you are—you *assimilate* into your surroundings,” I whispered to the body and returned to the hallway. Two men were approaching, one from either side. Though they hadn't yet realized I was there, they *had* noticed the death of their companion.

Their eyes were dark. Something about it made me feel nostalgic.

I felt them invoking their skills.

The man to the right reached in my direction, his arm stretching far enough to grab a chandelier. Then the limb retracted, pulling him in and upward, and he leaped down from above with a knife.

The man to the left charged at me along the walls.

“What good skills,” I remarked.

I invoked Unobtrusive again.

As I moved away from the man plunging from above, he glanced left and right. He'd clearly lost sight of me. Perhaps he recognized he was in danger, because he grabbed a windowsill to pull himself away.

I was too quick for him, though.

I aimed my knife at his temple, straight and true. Its tip pierced through the bone and hit his brain tissue. The man dropped to the ground, lifeless, then rolled along the hall floor.

“Stabbed him right in the head?!” The other man spoke aloud unintentionally and seemed to waver on whether to run or fight.

This was a normal reaction when a person faced someone overwhelmingly more powerful than them, especially when they realized they would never catch up, no matter how they trained. I wouldn’t allow a split second of hesitation to go unutilized.

I hurled the knife.

Shunk. It stuck straight out of the man’s chest.

“We were children by comparison...”

Those were the man’s dying words.

“Looks like we were caught off guard by each other’s skills,” I said to my two dead opponents. “When the unexpected happens, that’s when your true strength is tested.”

Experience and composure. I’d had an advantage this time. That was all.

It seemed that all the men I’d killed were assassins.

I’d recommended King Randolph hire such guards in the past—set a thief to catch a thief, so they say. Fight an assassin with an assassin—that seemed the most logical thing to do.

I arrived in front of what I believed to be the correct room and opened the door.

“Wh-who are you?!”

The voice came from under a desk.

“As long as you answer my questions, no harm will come to you. You have my word,” I replied.

He peeked gingerly from his hiding place, revealing himself. When our eyes met, I lifted my hands to show I wasn’t lying. The man broke into a cold sweat

from fear, but he emerged from under the desk and took a seat.

“May I?” I pointed at the sofa. “Are you former count Amster?”

“Y-yes. That is me...”

I didn’t know how to begin, so I just went straight to the point. “I learned of your name through an employee at the underground guild. Regarding the bounty, did the arena’s destruction inconvenience you in some way?”

“*Th-that’s* what you’re here about...?”

What else was there?

Amster let out a long exhale and wiped his sweat with a handkerchief.

“You came all this way because of a quest from the underground guild?”

“More or less. And I’d like you to tell me where you got your information about the target.”

“So that’s what this is about,” Amster commented. “Then I shall answer your questions thusly. Losing the arena hurt me in no way whatsoever. I wasn’t even aware of the place.”

“Wait, then why did you issue a quest?”

“I’m simply the proxy. I know nothing about the target or the details. They simply asked to use my name...”

“*Who* asked?” I pressed.

“You’re less informed than I am. I thought *they* sent you at first.”

“*Them*”? I wasn’t following. Perhaps sensing that, Amster began to explain.

“It started with my daughter’s kidnapping two months ago.”

“Your daughter?”

“Mm-hmm. The abductor wouldn’t identify themselves. Instead, they demanded that I use my own name to create a quest with the underground guild. And naturally, I did. I had no other option. Once the quest is fulfilled, I’m to pay the reward. Only then will they return my daughter...”

So that meant it was someone else who knew about me. They must have

spotted me at the underground arena. I used my skill in front of the audience once. Had a spectator recognized me?

“And what about those guards?” I asked next.

“Ah, yes... They are indeed guards, but they also act as my overseers. To ensure I don’t attempt anything inadvisable.”

“Who sent them?”

Amster shook his head. “I’m not sure. They just appeared in my home... Since you’ve made your way here, am I to assume they’re gone?”

“Yes, I killed them all.”

“Are you...powerful, perchance?”

“I’ve never considered myself to be,” I answered.

Amster nodded several times, as though he’d come to a realization. “Please, I’m begging you, save my daughter.”

The kidnapper had a connection to the quest’s true client.

“I’ll do anything I can to repay you! Please! She’s only four years old.”

Amster stood and bowed so low and fast that he nearly struck his head against the desk.

Someone connected to all this knew who I was. That was enough to make me indescribably uneasy. Now that I knew, I needed to take care of them.

“I don’t have enough information yet,” I replied. “First, I’ll find out where she is. That’s where I’ll start.”

“Y-you mean you’ll help?” Amster seemed hopeful.

“I think it’s within my abilities, so I won’t say it’s impossible. Oh, but there’s one thing I’d like you to do.”

“What? Tell me whatever you need,” Amster said.

“If you could, take care of the three corpses.”



“Another promise poorly thought out. Fool.”

No sooner had I returned home to the castle in Izaria than Rila set to berate me. She'd been waiting in my room in her black cat form, so I'd told her about my day.

“I believe I've put plenty of thought into it,” I responded.

“So it's a hostage rescue this time? You've been quite the busy one of late, knave. Hmph.” Rila the cat turned her face away from me.

“This goes beyond busy,” I told her. “I work as a guild employee during the day and as an adventurer in the underground guild when I'm off.”

“When do you sleep?”

She scratched at her collar with her back paw. That was likely her way of telling me to return her to her original form. Once I touched the collar for her, Rila glowed and changed to her true body—that of the demon lord.

“I see. So this is your way of expressing your worry about me.”

“Worrying about you is an exercise in futility...but I cannot help it.” Rila patted her thighs from her perch atop the bed.

“You may use my lap,” she offered.

“I think a pillow would be more advisable if I mean to get any actual rest.”

“You deign to take my goodwill for granted?” Rila looked upset for some reason, so I did as she asked and lay with my head on her lap. “I sense panic from you,” she continued.

“Really? I don't think I am.”

“Then it's a needless worry on my part.” She tugged on my ear.

“What are you doing?”

“...This is punishment for paying mind to women other than me,” she said bitterly, yet she kissed me sweetly all the same. “Th-though I have been merciful enough to forgive your transgression, do not think that has improved my mood...”

Rila gave me another kiss and asked, “What are you seeking to accomplish,

knave?”

“I have a bad feeling about this, and I think if I let it be, I’ll regret it later. I want to find out what’s making me so uneasy. That’s all,” I explained.

“Then something threatens your *normalcy*?”

“Possibly, or possibly not.”

“...Do I have a place in this ‘normal’ you are constructing for yourself, knave?”

“Why are you asking that now? Of course you do.”

The somberness finally left Rila’s face, and she lay down beside me. Turning to face me, she pinched my nose.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“I seem to recall you have been rather sweet on Dey lately.”

“What are you trying to imply?”

“As I told you, I mind not what you do or where you do it, but I am the one you are to hold and cherish most of all.”

When I stared at her, I realized she was blushing. Rila turned over, putting her back to me. Evidently, she had no qualms speaking her mind but couldn’t help feeling embarrassed anyway. I hugged her from behind, and my hand moved beneath her clothes.

“Oh...”

“I’m taking it off.”

“F-first you must whisper sweet nothings to me... There is an order to things, you fool...” Rila’s voice tapered off.

I forced her to face me, and kissed her while holding her slender shoulders. Then I pulled my hand out from her clothes and turned away. She stared up at me with doleful eyes, looking like she wanted more, and whispered, “Wh-why did you stop...?”



“You’ll know soon enough.”

Wham, wham, someone rapt loudly at the door.

“Lord Rileylaaaaa? You’ve been out for a very long time, so I, Roje Sandson, have come to fetch you!”

“Grrr...Roje...! Has she no sense for mood? Hmph...” Rila cleared her throat. “Y-you needn’t for today. I—I will be awaiting sunrise here...so I will not be returning to our chambers.”

“What?! Why?” Roje replied.

“I j-just want to!”

“O-okay...,” Roje answered. She didn’t seem to understand in the slightest. “As you wish...,” she muttered before leaving.

“Really now. She is too much. Hmph!” Rila said.

As we went about our business, I sensed Dey’s approach.

“Oh my. My, my, my. So, you’re with Lord Rileyla today...” She was peeking in from outside.

“—!” Rila stomped to the window and performed an approximation of slamming the curtains shut. “This is insufferable. She ruined what remained of the mood.”

“Lord Rileylaaa? If you’re already at it, why not let him spoil us *both*?”

“Just me is fine!”

The libidinous undead vampire and Rila scowled as they bickered.

“In that case, I’ll just enjoy the sounds, so please, go right ahead.”

“Go awaaaay!”

After shooing Dey off, Rila returned, her shoulders heaving from her efforts.

“I wouldn’t have minded a three-wa—” A slipper struck me in the head. “What was that for?”

“I believe I just got through telling you to care for me *twice* as much as anyone else,” Rila huffed.

“You never said anything about double.”

“Do not squabble over details. It seems you are a busy man, even in your own room...” Rila sounded forlorn. I stroked her head, and she nestled close to my chest.

“This is good,” she said. “It’s enough for me to be happy...”

Only two or three hours remained until dawn, so we slept.

◆ Dey ◆

“How did today go?”

It was just before evening. Dey called out in her sweetest voice to Bale, who’d returned to the inn room. Roland had asked her to get close to Bale, but she was growing fed up with the job. Bale worked for the Welger Company and previously led a gray wolf poaching group. He was also the only survivor of the operation, and although the experience had left him gravely wounded, he’d since recovered and gone back to work. He was useful because he gave information to Dey, but...

Bale reached for her, to touch her, yet she avoided him. Dey only desired Roland, but Bale wouldn’t quit.

“...” The man looked conflicted as Dey took his things and helped him out of his coat. “Candey... I might know something about that kidnapped girl your friend mentioned to you.”

“Oh, really? That would be so helpful! Thank you so much, Bale.”

Dey couldn’t have asked him for information unrelated to herself, so she’d convinced Bale that one of her friend’s daughters had been kidnapped.

The vampire grinned, but internally, she was thinking on what Roland had told her earlier.

“The daughter of former count Ben Amster has been abducted. The person behind it apparently knows my identity. I need information about the kidnapper. The Welger Company is likely involved. Try to get Bale to look into it.”

Roland had assured her this would be the last information she would need to squeeze from Bale. In which case, once this was over, she could finally be done with this life. Dey was suddenly very motivated.

“I’ll tell you about it, but only under one condition,” Bale said.

“What?”

“Who...are you?”

Dey kept her smile up, even as the facade was about to crumble. She tilted her head, as though quizzical. “I’m an adventurer, silly. Didn’t I tell you before?”

“Dey, if he tries to learn more about you, feel free to kill him.” Roland had said that to her when first assigning this job.

Dey summoned a short bloodsucking spear behind her back so Bale wouldn’t see.

“Even I know about the guild and the system with adventurers. But I can’t believe someone with no history like you could act as an intermediary for a former aristocrat.” Bale shook his head as though he’d realized there was something off about Dey’s fake smile. “...Sorry. I didn’t mean to sound harsh. But I want to know what I am to you.”

“Oh, come now. Aren’t you saving so we can live in your hometown together? Just be patient until we get there.” Dey didn’t know how much money the man had, and she wasn’t interested in finding out.

Bale looked pained as he nodded, eyes downcast. Perhaps to convince himself, he said, “Yes, right.”

Poor boy, Dey thought, though she felt little pity for him.

“A section of the Welger Company aided with the kidnapping of the Amster girl,” Bale began. Unfortunately, Dey noticed a faint presence outside the inn. Seizing the bloodsucking spear she’d nearly dismissed, she snuffed the lights.

“What’s wrong?”

“You were followed,” Dey said.

“Huh?”

“Ugh, you’re such an *oblivious* man. Dummy. You’ve been caught leaking information.”

Bale must have been left alive so he could be followed. It was the best way to uncover who he was revealing secrets to.

“But...”

Although the room was dark, the faint orange rays of the morning sun had started coming through the gaps in the closed curtains.

Vampires fared best at night. Beneath the sun, they were no stronger than average humans. Dey clucked her tongue. She could have disposed of Bale and saved herself, but then she wouldn’t hear all he knew.

If her senses were to be trusted, there were four people—one outside, one on the first floor, and two approaching from the hall.

“Let’s go,” she stated.

Dey grabbed Bale by his collar as he tried to say something, then she kicked out the window and leaped outside. Dey landed gracefully while Bale fumbled the landing.

When the outside assailant noticed them, he approached quietly. Dey sensed something from him, something like what she felt from Roland. She doubted the getaway would be easy, especially with Bale still out of sorts. She prepared herself for her fate as she cast Bale to the side and readied her spear.

“C-Candey?”

“Shush. Just cower there in a corner or something,” she told him.

A spear would have been unwieldy in a hallway or a room. Jumping outside wasn’t a poor decision, but the other enemies would be here in ten seconds. While Dey was occupied with this assailant, the others would be able to surround her.

The vampire took in a breath and slowly let it out. Dey activated her evil eye, a power unique to her kind. Her opponent was shifting from side to side to keep from being targeted, but Dey’s evil eye could follow him easily and accurately. The power was also particularly keen against those of the opposite sex. Her

abilities were limited by daylight, but Dey was confident she could render this man temporarily motionless. She would use all her strength on her first and final blow.

The faint sound of magic caught Dey's ears, and she realized immediately that the man had countered her attack. It didn't seem he was aware of her evil eye. Rather, he'd employed some unusual defense he'd established beforehand. Dey wasn't at full power, but her evil eye failing against a human male wounded her pride.

She saw a slight smile on the man's face. That didn't agree with Dey at all.

The vampire thrust her spear at the man, yet caught only air.

"Tsk!"

The man closed in on Dey, wielding two daggers.

She'd anticipated that, however. Dey allowed her spear to disappear and immediately summoned a shorter one, striking again. The assailant shouldn't have expected this. The tip was speeding toward his chest, and Dey was certain this would kill him.

Her expectation was dashed, though. Dey's weapon did strike true, but the man invoked a skill, and the wound in his chest disappeared, reforming on his left hand.

"...Oh my, my... I see..."

Dey sighed as the other assailants joined the fight, encircling her.

"I wonder who will receive the reward for eliminating Candice Minelad..."

The woman smiled sardonically to herself and attacked the man before her with her spear once more. Dodging proved a simple effort for him, though.

Suddenly, all four of Dey's opponents seemed to vanish, like candles blown out in the dark.

"You better not die without asking for my permission first."

The low, exasperated voice had come from behind.

The man who'd so easily evaded her twice collapsed. A new figure stood in

the light of dawn, a former assassin—a man of the shadows ironically illuminated by daybreak.

◆ Roland ◆

Another assassin.

I killed the last one trying to attack Dey instantly, then took his knife and threw it.

Dey began to fall, and I hurried over to hold her up.

“Looks like I made it right on time,” I said.

“Master Roland...why did you do all of this?”

“I didn’t get the scheduled message from you. You’ve never been late or missed one. I knew something was off.”

Dey peered up at the blinding morning light filling the sky.

“Is that right? Will you look at the time...”

“You always seem to have the worst luck.”

“I really *am* unlucky. Ugh...”

Dey filled me in on the situation. From what I gathered, things were as I’d imagined.

“They realized Bale was the informant. I can’t think of any other reason they’d pursue him.”

“I’d thought we’d be able to get more from him, but I guess our foes were further ahead of the game than I’d expected.”

I looked at Bale, who was slumped over.

“Y-you...you’re from the gray wolves’ woods—!”

“Thank you for back then,” I responded. Previously, Bale’s job had been to poach gray wolves—an illegal venture. I’d instructed Dey to get close to him to learn more about the Welger Company. “And thank you for taking such good

care of Dey... I guess that should've been past tense. You've helped reveal a lot about the Welger Company."

"...What do you mean?" Bale questioned.

"Oh my, my. You're so slow on the uptake," Dey said. "*This* is what he means." She took my arm and kissed me, as though to show off.

"Get off."

"Never! ♡"

"I—I see... You tricked me..." Bale hung his head with a sad grin. "I always thought it was weird. Figures. You had me convinced..."

"I'm *sooo* sorry. I do anything that Master Roland asks. I'd become a saint for him or a devil."

Dey was apologizing, but I sensed no actual guilt from her. What a frightening woman.

"Master Roland, he knows something about the kidnapping."

"Oh? What, exactly?"

The discussion didn't seem appropriate to hold outdoors, so we headed to Dey's room at the inn.

"I can't stay in the Welger Company, so I guess there's no reason for me to keep this secret anymore." Bale readily started telling us what he knew. "Is the former count Amster your acquaintance?"

"Not quite, but I *am* involved," I replied.

"I see. So you know I was part of the post that heads up the kidnappings. Then this'll be quick. Another squad helped with the abductions."

"Did the Welger Company have anything to gain by being involved?"

Amster, the victim, had been forced to file the request and had to pay when the job was completed. If the Welger Company was behind him doing that, then they stood to profit from the kidnapping.

"The squad members were complaining 'cause it didn't seem relevant to their actual duties. So maybe they were just being used."

“By whom?” I pressed.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Bale said.

So, to summarize...

- Someone knows my identity.
- Based on the quest posting, it’s someone who was involved with the underground arena.
- To prevent anyone from finding out who they were, they had Amster submit the quest.
- After that, they had the Welger Company kidnap Amster’s daughter for leverage.

“Do you know where they took the hostage?” I questioned.

“Yeah... Oh, they must’ve gotten suspicious because I stuck my nose into their business even though I wasn’t involved in the operation.”

I doubted four assassins would tail him for that alone. It was more likely that they suspected he was the leak all along, and his inquiries confirmed their suspicions.

“Where is she?” I asked.

“I just know the location’s somewhere near the border between Felind and Bardenhawk. But there aren’t many places on the outskirts they could use.” Bale drew out a rough map and marked three spots.

“This is helpful,” I told him.

Bale glanced at me and Dey—who still clung to me—and sighed. His shoulders slumped. Apparently, he really liked her.

“You wouldn’t even let me touch a hair on your head...but you’re all over him...”

“Master Roland isn’t a fool like you,” Dey countered.

“Without you, we would have remained in the dark on many details. I want to thank you in some way,” I told Bale.

Dey regarded me with surprise.

“Money then, just give me money. I need enough to get home safely...”

“I wouldn’t mind giving you her.”

“Don’t joke around,” Bale shot back.

Dey must have traumatized him.

I carried money with me to use for negotiations. I gave what I had to him, along with my reward from the underground guild’s quest, to Bale. He counted out the stacks of cash, and his eyes widened.

“Nine million...?!”

“Is that not enough?”

“No, that’s fine. It’s plenty. I’m afraid of what will happen if I ask for more...”

Dey giggled.

“Oh dear, oh dear. Oh my, oh my. What did you do to Bale, Master Roland?”

“You’re incorrigible,” I said.

“Hee-hee. ♡”

I’d killed all of Bale’s pursuers. It would be a while before those in charge realized he was still alive. I hadn’t seen anyone watching the fight, either. It was likely the Welger Company wouldn’t try anything more soon.

I told Bale as much.

“I see. Thank goodness. With my savings and this, I should have enough to live a quiet life at home.” Bale produced a large bag and started to pack.

“Master Roland, do you always walk around with such a large amount of money?” Dey asked.

“It’s easy to buy convenience when you have cash. I tend to get a very different result when I can produce the money immediately instead of explaining how much I’ll give later.”

It was also an excellent way to prove you could be trusted for a payment down the line.

Once Bale was done packing, he stood.

“I’ll say this again: You were of great help.” I offered him a hand, and after some emotions played out on his face, he took it.

“You really put me through some awful stuff. Well, perhaps that’s what I get for joining a place like the Welger Company...”

We broke the handshake and Bale turned to Dey.

“Candey...thank you. I know he told you to do it, but you really did save me.”

“Hee-hee. Make sure you steer clear of strong women in the future.”

“After learning from experience, I think I’m going to lie low for a while.” Bale bid us good-bye and left.

“Wonder if he’ll be okay? He’s not very strong. If someone from the Welger Company spots him...,” Dey said.

“If you’re that concerned, why don’t you go after him?”

“Ugh, why do you have to say something so mean?”

“That’s why I gave him money. He can bribe lower-ranking company members for safety. After that, it comes down to his luck.”

Bale was washing his hands of the business, and that was easier said than done.

“I hope he’ll be able to live out his days in his hometown,” I said.

“I was convinced you’d just kill him on the spot...,” Dey commented.

“I suppose I’ve gone soft.”

Perhaps I projected a bit onto Bale.

My past lingered close behind as I walked my current path in life. No matter how hard I tried to get away, it was there, like my shadow.

“I think I’ll see my shadow many more times,” I muttered.

“?” Dey’s eyes went wide.

I shook my head. “Never mind.”

I headed to the last place Bale had marked out on his map.

At first, it seemed to be an abandoned village. Many of the structures were ruined, and the faint smell of decay hung in the air.

“There.”

Amid so many dilapidated buildings, a single one appeared comparatively well kept. According to Bale’s map, the kidnappers might be hiding somewhere in this village. Considering the abductors were likely with their victim, it made sense they’d stay in a semi-livable house. Hiding in the shadows of the ruined buildings, I made my way to the house and discovered a dome-shaped magic barrier around it. Someone was keeping watch from a gap in the curtains of a second-floor window.

Unlike the fake Maylee’s abductors, this group didn’t seem the happy-go-lucky type. Back then, I snuck in before the kidnappers had a chance to set up defenses.

I melded into my surroundings and crept closer, moving into a blind spot, approaching the barrier, and using Dispell.

Klink. The satisfying sound of the magic shattering reverberated in my ears as the shield faded away. Then I heard someone inside say, “Hey, the barrier outside’s gone.”

The man standing guard on the second floor had noticed the change.

“Probably just a mistake or something. Ask to get it set up again.”

I could have walked right in, but I determined a covert approach from above and making my way down was best. I snuck onto the premises from the outer wall and climbed up the side of the house, moving toward a second-floor window.

I knocked on the pane and hid out of sight. When I tapped against the glass again, I detected someone moving inside.

The window creaked open.

“Did you hear that...?”

The one keeping watch from earlier stuck his head out and glanced around

until his eyes finally met mine.

“Huh?!”

“See you.”

I grabbed his head with both my hands and turned it around sharply.

A dull snap. I gently released the man's head, now stuck at an awkward angle, careful not to make any sound.

When I got inside, I saw no one else around. I was sure there'd been another person. Perhaps they'd gone downstairs to report the broken barrier.

I searched the dead man's pockets and found three throwing knives. They were sharp and of good quality. The door out of the room led straight to a stairwell.

After deciding I would “borrow” the knives, I put my ear to the floor and listened in on the conversation between two others happening below. One of the speakers was a woman.

Someone was grumbling as they made their way up the steps.

“Damn that blasted girl... Thinks she's so high-and-mighty... I'll have my way with her sometime, she'll see!”

“Sounds like you've got fun plans for the future. How about inviting me?”

“—!”

My eyes met the man's, and I threw a knife. It cut through the air, whistling quietly as it went until it stopped in his forehead.

“Who—? Ahhh...”

I grabbed him before he collapsed and dragged him from the hall to the room I'd entered from. Based on the conversation about someone else remaking the barrier, I gathered that the woman mentioned was a mage.

I retrieved my knife from the corpse and cleaned off the blood.

“You better keep a close watch out, you hear? I mean, that's all you two are good for,” a haughty female voice chided from below. She sounded young.

I slowly made my way down to the first floor. There, a girl with blue hair waited with hands on her hips and a scowl on her face. Upon seeing me, she looked surprised, then cautious.

“Looks like they weren’t even good lookouts, then.”

“Your friends are all dead,” I informed her.

“Tch! S-so you were the one who broke my barrier?!”

“Yes,” I answered.

The girl backed away from me, and I immediately felt her gathering mana. She was quick and clever. Clearly, she intended to employ some defensive spell rather than go on the offensive.

“Force Field!”

There came a sound like something hardening as a transparent shield formed around the girl. The magic resembled what I’d seen encircling the house.

“Heh-heh-heh...! Now you won’t be able to lay a finger on me!”

“Well, I never intended to go anywhere near you in the first place, so that doesn’t matter to me.”

“Huh...? F-fight me! And what do you mean I don’t matter to you?! You came here to get the hostage, right?!”

Apparently, this girl was convinced there’d be a battle. I was more than willing to take care of anyone in the way of my goal, but I mainly wanted to save the hostage and find out who was behind the scheme.

“I guess you have a point,” I conceded.

The girl proudly stuck out her chest and put her hands on her hips. “Heh-heh-heh...! You can’t open the door to the room where that girl is without me! So now what?”

I didn’t really know what to make of this...

“Your defense magic, or whatever it is, won’t work on me,” I told her.

“That’s what everybody says,” she replied. “If you’re underestimating my abilities just ‘cause I’m a girl, you’ve got a—”

“Dispell.”

Klink. Her barrier vanished in an instant.

“ ...”

The mage girl was silent for a moment, then began to shake her head.

“Like I said—” I began.

“Force Field!”

Klang. The magical shield reformed.

“...If you dare to underestimate my power just because I’m a girl, you’ll be sorry!”

“Are you trying to have a do-over...?”

Was she pretending that the first time didn’t count? She was even posing and putting on airs. This girl was very determined to see the whole act through.

“Behold! What do you think of my spell? It’s impossible to reach me, so you might as well turn around and hightail it home!”

“Dispell.”

Klink.

“...Force Field!”

“Dispell.”

“ ...”

I made my way closer to the girl, slowly and steadily.

“F-Force Field!”

“Dispell.”

The girl kept backing away to get farther from me, but now she had finally run into the wall. She started tearing up.

“F...F-Force Field...”

“Dispell.”

“...Sniffle...”

She didn't try to use any other magic. Wait, did that mean...?

"Force Fie—"

"Dispell."

Klink.

"Th-this is the only spell I know, so please staaawp!"

She slumped down and started to cry. This wasn't my fault. The entire situation was the result of her behavior... So why did I feel guilty?

She rubbed her eyes with her sleeve, then stood up.

"Hah, you've let your guard down! *Force Field!*"

"You're supposed to attack when you say that line. *Dispell.*"

Crack. The barrier disappeared no sooner than it had formed.

"Hwahhh... Ugh... I—I can't take this anymore..."

When she dropped to the floor again and began to sob, I handed her a handkerchief.

"Use this."

"Okay... You're nice..."

I stroked her head the same way I would when Maylee threw a tantrum.

"I won't hurt you," I told her. "I just want you to tell me something."

"I—I can't, even if you're kind to me..."

"If you keep crying, no one will be able to see your pretty face."

The girl looked straight up at me, so I brushed away the tears on her cheeks.

"D-don't say things like that... I—I might start liking you..."

I told her my name, and she told me hers—Ravishia.

"If that's difficult to pronounce, you can call me Ravi," she said, and I chose to go with that.

When I asked Ravi where the hostage was, she simply told me, as though she'd already abandoned the idea of resisting. This place was previously a

simple village home, and it lacked a basement. Thus, Ravi merely locked the hostage in a room and placed one of her specialty barrier spells around it.

In that room, I found a young girl sitting alone. She seemed unharmed and had taken a liking to Ravi.

“Are we going somewhere, big sis?” the girl asked.

“Mm-hmm, back to your dad, Sofie. You’re going home,” Ravi answered.

“Okay!”

Right. Amster’s daughter’s name was Sofie, I remembered.

The girls held hands like true siblings, albeit ones of disparate ages, and left the room together. Since I’d already set up a Gate to Ben Amster’s home, I jumped straight there with Sofie and Ravi.



Upon our arrival at the manor, Ben dashed outside.

“Sofie!”

“Oh, Papa!”

She pattered forward and rushed into her father’s arms.

“I’m so relieved... Are you hurt?”

“Nuh-uh. I’m all wight.”

“I’m glad, so very glad,” Amster repeated. There were tears in his eyes.

Ravi, who seemed to feel somewhat awkward, ducked behind me to hide.

“Thank you... I cannot believe you located my daughter so quickly.”

I took his outstretched hand. “It’s nothing. I’m simply glad she’s safe.”

“And who is this girl?”

Ravi ducked her head.

“Oh, right... She helped me rescue your daughter.”

“Huh? But, um, I...” Ravi hemmed and hawed.

Sofie waved her hand innocently. “Thank you, big sis!”

“Uhh... Ah-ha-ha...” Unsure what to do, Ravi simply waved back.

“Is that right? Thank you for everything you did for my daughter. I have no idea how I could ever repay you for this kindness.”

The former count Amster bowed his head several times. He insisted upon treating us to tea and snacks. Ravi and I both clumsily turned him down, but he wouldn’t take no for an answer. Before I knew it, we were being ushered inside.

“Y-you don’t need to thank me. I’ll head home,” Ravi said.

“Nope. You’re coming, too,” I told her. “Make sure you grasp the full enormity of what you did.”

“Uhh...”

I grabbed Ravi, who was dead set on fleeing, and forced her to enter the parlor with me. As we partook of black tea and snacks, we made some small talk and spoke about the rescue.

“From my investigation, I’ve learned the kidnappers are from the Welger Company,” I told Amster.

“Truly...?!” His eyes opened wide.

I elbowed Ravi, who sat next to me on the sofa. There was something I didn’t know. And it would be much faster to have Ravi explain.

“Oh, uhh...right. The Welger Company kind of acts as a criminal organization... And some of the employees kidnapped her, but someone outside the company gave the orders this time.”

“Someone else...?”

Bale had mentioned something similar, suggesting the Welger Company was doing another’s dirty work, and that the true mastermind lurked behind the scenes.

“Yes, an aristocrat in the Felind Kingdom...”

From Felind?

I looked at Ravi reflexively and realized she was starting to tear up. “Uhh... I don’t know what to do... Am I allowed to talk about this?”

I gave her another elbow prod. When she looked at me, I motioned at her with my chin.

“Out with it.”

“Uhhh... But it’ll be really bad if I do...”

“Just tell us.”

“Don’t look at me like that. You’re scaring me. Okay, okay... It’s a man named...Barbatos Guerrera... But that’s a secret! You absolutely have to keep it secret!” Ravi put her finger to her lips and made a shushing sound.

“Barbatos...Guerrera... The count...” I’d heard his name before, but I didn’t know much about the man’s character. “Mr. Amster, do you have any connection with this Barbatos fellow?”

“No...I do not. This is the first I’ve heard his name.”

If he had no ties with the count, then the Amster family had been drawn into an ordeal unrelated to them. Barbatos Guerrera had used the former count’s good name to submit the quest, preventing others from learning of his involvement. That suggested a certain level of discretion. More importantly, I had no connection to Barbatos Guerrera. Although, things might be different if I discovered he was an old acquaintance who’d changed his name.

“B-but that’s super dangerous to know! It’s a secret! Okay! You have to keep quiet about it!” Ravi insisted.

“Right, sure, I got it,” I assured her.

“That’s exactly something someone would say when they *don’t* get it! You have to promise me that you’ll never tell anyone else! Let’s do a pinkie swear.”

Ravi stared intensely at me, as serious as can be. She held her pinkie out and refused to put it down, so I finally gave in.

“Cross my heart and hope to die! Stick a needle in my eye!”

“If that’s all I need to do, I’ll stick a needle anywhere you want.”

She bounced our pinkies up and down in rhythm, and then her eyes went wide.

“Huh? Y-you’ll what?”

“Uh...nothing.”

“A-anyway. We pinkie promised... Whew, I think we’re okay for now, then...”

A bright smile spread over Ravi’s face as she wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. Had she really put all her faith into a little pinkie promise? Looking absolved, she grabbed a cookie and stuffed it in her mouth, letting crumbs fall as she followed it with some tea.

“Mr. Amster, it seems you can now withdraw the quest.”

“Ah, I suppose you’re right. I’m glad I won’t need to pay that bounty, either.”

He had no idea that the wanted man was staring him in the face.

“I do wonder when the Welger Company became such a backward organization... I never heard of it possessing a criminal element before.”

“...Did it used to be different?”

“Why, of course. When I was there, workers were honest, and it operated as a proper merchant guild.” Amster appeared to be reminiscing. He chuckled quietly.

“You...used to be part of the Welger Company?”

“Hey! Listen! These chocolate chip cookies are sooooo good and—”

“You just focus on eating them.” I thrust several more of the sweets into Ravi’s mouth.

“Well, it wasn’t that I was with them so much as leading them... I was the guild master.”

“So, just curious, but when was this?”

“Right before the downfall of the Duchy of Bardenhawk. In the past, we had a large estate in Izaria and several firms in important locations.” Amster sipped his tea, then slowly lowered his cup onto its saucer.

“Please give me all the details,” I stated.

“It’s all quite dreary, though. Are you sure?”

I told him, “I don’t mind.” Amster smiled wanly.

“Before becoming a noble, I was born to a poor farming family.”

He explained that, after working hard and following the family trade in his youth, he abandoned that and devoted himself to becoming a peddler. According to Amster, luck and an acute business sense lifted him up above his peers. He was a classic rags-to-riches story.

Eventually, he advanced his enterprise by opening a shop. And in time, that was profitable enough to expand, ultimately growing into a gigantic organization later named the Welger Company.

Because each region had specific rules on business operations, Amster had bought his noble title to change the system and unify practices.

“But back then, the vice guild master, who had been aiding me, stole my seat at the top and chased me out of the enterprise I’d built. And, well, you can see the results for yourself.”

“So the Welger Company took to crime after it came under new management...”

We reached a good stopping point in the conversation, so I told Amster that Ravi and I were leaving.

Ben Amster and his daughter both shook my hand and saw me off.

“Hey, where are you going?” Ravi questioned.

“Home.”

“C-can I come with you...?”

“No.”

“Ugh... You didn’t even think about it... I—I have nowhere to go now. Especially since I failed my mission...”

“You’re part of the Welger Company, aren’t you?”

“Nooo! I’m one of Count Guerrera’s mages.”

“Seems this Guerrera doesn’t have much of an eye for talent. Why would he employ such a half-baked mage?”

“You’re so mean! If I go home a failure, he’ll kill me... Don’t you feel responsible for that?!”

“You reap what you sow.”

“Why do you have to put it that way? I-I’ll let you do whatever you want to me...”

“I’m not interested in kids.”

“I-I’m not a kid...”

I realized Ravi had stopped following me, so I turned around to discover she’d stripped to her underwear.

“S-see? I’m mature...”

She bit her lip and lowered her head, blushing. I sighed, went over to her, and wrapped my jacket around her.

“Remember this: Anyone who insists they’re an adult, isn’t.”

“Uwah... You seem so mature...and cool...”

Ravi was surely doing her best in her own way. She had guts and resolve—I could give her that.

“Come with me, don’t— Up to you,” I told her.

“R-really?! Thank you! Roland!”

Ravi and I headed back to my room in the capital. Needless to say, when I told her that was where I was living, she fell over in surprise.

3

A Rookie Adventurer and a Brief Look into Daily Life, Part I

The next day, when I went to the castle's dining room, I found Queen Leyte, Maylee, her guards, and Ravi already there. Milia and Iris were also staying in the castle, but they were eating somewhere else.

"Good morning, Rolaaand!"

"Morning."

Maylee tottered over to me, and I stroked her hair, then she tugged at my arm and brought me to a seat. "Over here, this one," she instructed.

Eelu, Lyan, Sanz, and Su—Maylee's guards and pretty girl squad members—greeted me as I sat down. Rila was curled up at my feet in her black cat form.

"I didn't think the next maiden you'd bring home would be a girl Milia's age," she remarked.

"Despite how she looks, she's a mage, and may come in useful."

"I suppose it's fine then," Rila answered.

Ravi, still nervous, whispered, "So Roland...I'm so out of my element that it's difficult to think... That woman and that girl—they're the queen and princess?"

"Don't worry, everyone here is nice. You're the only one I'd describe as a villain."

"Ugh... Did you really have to mention that now?"

"I have a job for you. After that, you can live here, take a room at an inn, or do whatever you please."

"A job?"

“I’ll explain later.”

Maylee responded when she noticed us talking, “Roland is my prince consort, so don’t steal him... Please...”

The members of the pretty girl squad giggled.

“Wow, her prince... Whaaat?! Prince consort?!”

“Quiet now. We’re in the middle of a meal,” I chided. “Obviously, that’s not true.”

Maylee pouted. “Nuh-uh, you are. Why would you say that?”

I didn’t know what to do, so I looked to the pretty girl squad for help.

“Master Roland, this only happens because you neglect to give her attention and are too busy with work,” Eelu explained with a laugh.

“Of course May is mad that you always get involved with other girls,” Lyan added, which earned a silent nod from Sanz.

Just as it seemed no one was coming to my rescue, Su said, “I don’t think that’s quite right. He’s choosing not to involve himself with other girls at all.”

“Yes. That’s exactly right,” I agreed.

“I mean, if you think about it, he hasn’t been treating us well either.”

“You’re siding with them, Su?”

Rila seemed to be enjoying this. She was cackling. “The consequences of your actions are nigh.”

“I don’t remember doing anything to deserve this,” I responded. “All right. I understand. I’ll come straight home after work.”

“You always say that and then go somewhere else, though,” Maylee protested.

“I won’t this time. I promise.”

Maylee held up her pinkie finger, so I made another pinkie promise.

“So you’re marrying into wealth then,” Ravi said on the way to the guild.

“No, Maylee...*Princess Alias* simply says those things of her own accord.”

“Uh-huh... Anyway, what’s that job you told me about?”

“I want you to become an adventurer.”

“An adventurer? But I’m a mage.”

“You don’t want to?” I asked.

“I’m not against it, but I don’t think a mage should go out of her way to take a job *anyone* could do.”

As we talked, I learned that Ravi studied magic under a mentor. This left her with the impression that anyone could be an adventurer if they passed the necessary tests. That seemed to be why she was so resistant.

“But my teacher told me I have talent,” Ravi continued.

“This is why Felind Kingdom’s mages are useless—all self-conceited because of unearned pride. From what I’ve gathered, you’re two stages behind demons when it comes to magic.”

“Th-that’s not true!”

Once we got to the guild, I had Ravi wait outside while I started my day as a staffer. Iris quickly informed us of recent updates while we opened the office. The building was soon full of adventurers who’d come in for work early in the morning.

I motioned for Ravi to enter and showed her to the chair across the counter from me. I had her write out her name and age on an adventurer exam slip and return it to me.

Charlize Trooper, fourteen.

I’d been right about her age.

“Let’s get this over with quickly,” she said. “You have a task for me, right?”

“If you pass the exam,” I replied.

“A mage such as myself wouldn’t fail.”

Considering Ravi could use defensive magic to make barriers in quick succession, she likely would do fine.

I set the mana measurement crystal on the counter.

“When you hold your hand up to this, it will glow according to how much mana you have,” I told her. “Then we’ll give you a rank based on that.”

“Oh, it’s that thing. I’ve done this before during training. It takes me back. My teacher had me use one every week. I don’t have any problems using magic. ♪” Ravi began to brag to those around her.

The raw ability to cast spells wasn’t too unusual, but learning the craft under a master was another matter entirely. It made her something more of a legitimate mage. Supposedly, there were even mages with pedigrees. This led to an element of prestige for anyone who studied under another in Felind. Such people even had their own factions, it seemed.

Ravi’s boasting began to attract people, although they may have just been waiting for spots at the counter to open up. In short order, the nearby adventurers were focused on Ravi.

“This is going to be a piece of cake for me!”

“The standard value is one thousand. That’s for C rank. We judge by a comprehensive set of standards that includes how you practically use magic, but if your mana is too low, you’ll fail on the spot.”

“Oh? Well, that shouldn’t apply to me.”

Ravi held her hand to the crystal, and it glowed.

“...”

“See, there we go. Hee-hee.”

I checked the numerical value. It was two hundred and thirty.

“So surprised that you’re speechless? That’s right. You have a prodigy in your midst. Hee-hee! ♪”

“...F rank. It’s passable, at least. You still have time to grow, so we can hope for improvement...,” I said.

I wrote the value and rank on the slip, along with some notes. Ravi’s Force Field spell consumed very little mana, or she was incredibly adept at converting

mana to magic.

“Pfft. All that bragging, and she’s only F rank?”

“Ha-ha-ha, and she calls herself a mage? There’s no way.”

“I started at D rank even after doing nothing.”

The adventurers who’d been watching laughed, which obviously got on Ravi’s nerves.

“Excuse me! This must be broken! The crystal has to be wrong! My magic used to be sooo much better!”

“That’s all in the past,” I said.

“It has to be a mistake! This thing must be bad at measuring because it’s old or something.”

“Broken? Bad at measuring...?”

I wasn’t a specialist with these types of crystals, so I couldn’t confidently refute the possibility of an issue. I quickly held my hands to the crystal, and as I did, the entire guild scrambled under desks and chairs, even hiding behind pillars.

“What’s gotten into all of you...?” Ravi asked.

“I don’t think it’s broken...” I held my hands up to the crystal, which shone brightly.

Crash!

The crystal exploded, sending pieces flying in all directions. A hush fell over the place.

“Hwah?!”

One of the fragments hit Ravi right in the forehead and threw her back, chair and all.

“Ravi, it wasn’t broken,” I stated.

I glanced at the girl and realized she was barely conscious. Her eyes looked vacant.

“That’s Mr. Argan for you.”

“I feel like it was much more explosive this time than the others.”

“Yeah, it definitely split into more bits than usual.”

“We should measure how far out the pieces travel next time.”

People were chattering among themselves as they emerged from cover.

“So that’s why everyone hid...,” Ravi muttered, her eyes still unfocused and her forehead red.

“Ow, that hurt...”

I placed a bandage on Ravi that Milia had retrieved from the first-aid kit.

“This only happened because you didn’t dodge it,” I told her.

“How was I supposed to evade something flying at me from so close?” she said, pouting.

“When I do exams, I place more importance on what you’re actually able to accomplish rather than raw mana measurements. You might have already failed were anyone else in charge of your exam.”

“What? But...if I can’t make it in, that must mean you have really high standards.”

“Confidence is fine, but you can’t overestimate your abilities.”

Next was the practical portion, where I would be fighting Ravi.

I doubted this part of the exam was necessary, but all I’d done in the past was destroy Ravi’s barriers. I had no idea how durable or tough the spell genuinely was. As such, I decided to go through with the mock fight.

“Next is the practical portion. Let’s head outside.”

My usual amount of plant identification and standard desk work meant that sparring with applicants had become rare for me.

Whispers passed among the adventurers.

“Hey, Mr. Argan is fighting her.”

“We get to see Mr. Argan do the practical?”

“I’d pay to see that.”

We headed out of the guild with about twenty adventurers following us.

“Who even are you, Roland?” Ravi questioned.

“Do I seem like anything other than a guild employee?”

“That’s what you look like right now... But normal guild employees don’t go around rescuing kidnapped children...”

I pretended to ignore her as we headed farther from the town.

Once we were in a field, the other adventurers formed an audience around us to spectate from afar.

“I know what magic you can use, but what about your skill? You didn’t write one down on the slip.”

“I haven’t tried to figure it out, so I’m not sure.”

Mages placed importance on spells, so many didn’t care to learn their skill.

“That’s fine. In this fight, I’ll acknowledge your capabilities or you’ll learn your limits by force. There’s no winner or loser.”

“Okay.”

“I’m going to attack. Block in whatever way you feel is fit.” By the time I finished my sentence, I was already behind Ravi.

The audience marveled.

“Woah.”

“H-he’s so fast... He’s already at her back.”

“Did you see that?”

“No, I didn’t catch that at all...”

“Miss, behind you! Behind you!”

Ravi turned her head at the shouts, finally spotting me.

“Arghhh! Wh-when did you move there?!”

“The exam’s already begun.” I flicked the bandaged spot on her forehead.

“Yee-ouch! That hurt... At least tell me when we’ve started...”

“A real fight wouldn’t have a signal to begin, and there wouldn’t be a referee.”

Ravi, who now looked more motivated, used her defense magic.

“Force Field.”

Klang. That same barrier I’d seen before enveloped her.

“Hmm.” I tapped on it while walking around its perimeter.

“A-are you gonna break it with another Dispell...?” Ravi eyed me with clear displeasure.

Just as I’d expected, the adventurers were impressed by the show of magic.

“Is that a defensive spell? Not bad, and it was fast, too.”

“Most shielding magic’s pretty crude and simple. Not many bother learning it.”

“And even when they do, it’s usually the bare minimum to get out of a tough spot.”

The utility of defensive magic aside, there were always occasions when a specialist was necessary.

“How far can you expand it?”

“Expand? I’ll try to spread it as far as I can. Move a little farther away.”

I took a few steps back, but Ravi waved me to go farther, so I gave her another ten yards. The half sphere began to grow until it was directly in front of my face.

“Oh?”

“How’s that?”

It covered a little more than ten yards in radius. That wasn’t bad at all. Ravi could shrink the size, as well. Next, I tried striking the barrier as hard as I could. It made no sound—silent as a grave.

“...”

After feeling it with my fist, I realized how it worked. Although the result was similar to a defensive spell, this wasn't magic at all. I attempted attacking with a low-level spell, but it did no better than my hand.

"Looks like even you can't break my defensive magic!" Ravi snickered.

"Dispell."

Crack...

"Arghhh! Why did you have to break it?" she cried.

"I'm simply testing it," I told her. "It's not unbreakable."

"Are you sure you're not just a sore loser, Roland?"

I approached Ravi to strike, and she invoked her shield again. I broke it. As soon as she erected a barrier, I shattered it; over and over.

I see... I'd finally figured it out.

"You use some mana when you trigger it, so it's hard to tell, but this is likely your skill," I told the girl.

"Huh?"

"It's quick to activate after you expend mana," I noted. "And you can use it in rapid succession."

My Unobtrusive skill was similar. It didn't consume mana at all, activated more quickly than magic, and could be used repeatedly with little downtime. Ravi's ability was no match for Victor's Invincible, but it was undoubtedly a skill, not a spell.

"But my teacher taught it to me," Ravi said.

"While uncommon, it's not impossible for people to possess the same skill."

Ravi's teacher had been able to impart it to her because they both had that barrier ability. Ravi had mistakenly believed it to be magic, that was all.

She *should* have been able to invoke it without mana. Since it wasn't a spell, there was no need to expend magical power, which explained why her mana capacity was so low. Understanding it was a skill made it clear why Ravi could only invoke the one "spell" and how she activated it repeatedly without pause.

Ravi looked a little surprised. “So that’s what it is. When I told my teacher that I wanted to learn offensive magic, too, he told me, ‘This is a good ability, so dedicate one hundred twenty percent to it.’”

“You had a good instructor,” I replied. When starting out, it was best to learn everything you could about your skill.

“This magic you call Force Field, or rather, your skill, preserves the status quo. If it were *just* a barrier, then punching it would hurt and produce a sound, but it did neither. I think it’s likely a defensive skill that prevents outside forces from altering anything within.”

In other words, the skill created a separate space within its range where time halted in a way. Ravi could also expand and contract the field at will, up to roughly ten yards around her. And maintaining it didn’t drain her mana.

“Your skill could be very useful to others,” I stated.

“Wait... W-was that praise...?”

I nodded and told her, “You’ve passed.”

“I did it! I was on the edge of my seat, thinking I’d failed...”

“That might have been the case if your abilities weren’t up to snuff,” I warned.

“I-I’m glad they *were* then...”

I explained the formalities we’d have to go through to Ravi as we walked back to the office. That was when the deluge of adventurers who’d been watching began to address her.

“Miss, did you pass? I wanted to ask, would you be willing to help my party with a little job?”

“Wait, wait! Don’t join *that* party. All their members smell. How about you join mine instead? Based on what we saw, you’d be a great help.”

Ravi didn’t know which way to look. Her eyes eventually settled on me.

“I told you there’d be work for you,” I reminded her.

“...You really meant it. I can be useful...”

“There are people who value your talents. You don’t have to resort to crime.”

Ravi’s eyes filled with tears, and she sniffled. “Th-thank you, Roland...”

“This is the result of your own skill and hard work,” I reminded her.

It seemed she’d convinced herself of the idiotic notion that she was only fit for criminal activities.

Ravi stopped in her tracks, and her throat trembled as she burst into sobs.

“Thank you, Roland...,” she repeated.

The adventurers watching offered their thoughts.

“Mr. Argan, always making girls cry.”

“It’s not really in a bad way, though.”

“Guess you’re right.”

Ravi wiped her face with her sleeve as I stroked her head and offered a handkerchief.

Once back in the guild, I handed Ravi her adventurer permit and described the rules and regulations of being an adventurer to her, as well as things to be cautious of.

“I got it, I know,” she answered.

She was back to her usual haughty self, despite the earlier waterworks. Seeing her act like that worried me—greatly.

“You’re not actually a mage,” I told her. “In short, that makes you a sheltered girl with a useful skill. You’re an F-rank adventurer, which is the lowest rung. If you keep acting superior, people won’t take nicely to it. Make sure you don’t get into any fights.”

“I won’t. I’ll be careful.”

After that, I arranged an F-rank quest for her.

“Gutter...cleaning...?” Ravi looked positively disgusted.

“I’m counting on you,” I said. “When they get clogged, paths end up flooded during heavy rain. I’m sure you have no complaints, right, F ranker?”

“Grrr... I don’t. I’ll do what I can...”

I sent Ravi on her way and returned to my usual duties.

Soon, the sun began to set, and closing time approached. Most adventurers had left for the day.

“Roland!” Maylee, carrying her pet tsunorabi, burst in.

“What? I can’t give you a quest right now,” I told her.

The princess’s five guards followed soon after.

“I know! I’m here to pick you up!”

The women protecting Maylee beamed as they watched. Other employees who heard the exchange also grinned.

“That’s so nice. Maylee came all the way here to bring you home!” Milia let out a small giggle.

“She’s here because I promised I’d go straight home today,” I replied.

“I see. Then you better head off soon.”

Before the matter with the underground guild, I spent most of my time in Bardenhawk behind the counter. This new guild had been busy since its establishment, so there was no shortage of work if I went looking for it. However, overtime didn’t appear to be in my future this evening. I had to go right back to the castle.

Maylee had been staring at me the whole time from the other side of the counter.

“Are you almost done?” she questioned.

“Yes, just a bit longer,” I assured her.

“If I help, could you go home sooner?”

“Please, just sit.”

“Okay!”

I finally arrived at a good stopping point and closed the door once our open hours had ended. Iris thanked the staff for our work, signaling the end of the

business day.

“Are you done?” Maylee pressed. “Can we go now?”

“Yes, let’s,” I said.

“Yay!”

All seven of us filed out of the staff exit, and as we strolled idly back to the palace, Maylee told me about the things she’d been up to recently.

“Maylee’s been worried about you this entire time. She’s been diligently studying even though she hates it. And it’s all to spend time with you when you come home or have a day off,” Roje informed me.

“Seems like you’re going to become a splendid princess,” I praised Maylee.

“Did I do good?”

“Yes. You’re doing well.”

I stroked Maylee’s hair, which must have tickled, because she squinted a bit.

Even Eelu and Lyan, who usually stuck so close to Maylee that she objected, backed off slightly and walked behind us.

“Rila said, ‘I’m his partner. He would never trifle with a waif the likes of you,’ so I told her, ‘No way!’”

I could picture Rila making a remark like that. She was undoubtedly waiting for us at the castle.

“Mother says I’ll be a grown-up in five years and that I can make you my prince consort once I am. So will you? Please?”

Maylee really was set on this. I smiled, though glibly, and briefly considered what would come to be in five years.

“...Let me think about it,” I said.

“Mm... Fine. Okay,” she replied.

Maylee was evidently unhappy about my delayed answer.

Roje elbowed me. “Be more sensitive!”

“There’s no guarantee I’ll be around in five years,” I explained. “I can’t get her

hopes up that I'll be alive."

"Well...I suppose you have a point...but I very much doubt you..." Roje trailed off, but it seemed she felt it unlikely that I'd die in that time. I took that to mean she had quite a bit of faith in my abilities. Still, death could arrive at a moment's notice.

None of the targets I'd killed thought they would perish when they did, after all.

I would likely meet my end before I was prepared for it.

A person could vanish instantly, leaving nothing behind. That's what my old life had taught me.

"...You won't die," Roje stated. "Though it is regrettable—*most* regrettable—Lord Rileyla loves you. She will not let you go so easily."

"Very convincing words from Commander Roje," I quipped.

"Don't mock me. And just so you're aware, I still don't like you." So saying, Roje turned away from me.



“But Roje, you always say nice things about Roland. Like that he’s on another level when it comes to fighting,” Maylee revealed.

“Grrr... Maylee. Don’t talk about—”

“And you said he was coo—Mffgh?”

Roje hurriedly covered the princess’s mouth. “I said nothing! I said none of those things!”

When the pretty girl squad saw Roje all riled up, they giggled.

4

A Rookie Adventurer and a Brief Look into Daily Life, Part II

Once we were back at the castle, I ate the dinner that had been prepared for us. Maylee hardly left my side and ended up bathing with me, too.

“I think you’re old enough to wash yourself,” I’d protested, but she whined like a puppy until getting her way.

I followed Maylee to the grand bath that was exclusively for royal use. As I undressed, Maylee lifted her arms up and waited for me to take her clothes off.

“May I join you?” Rila asked. She had appeared at our feet at some point. I returned her to her original form.

“Roland, you have so many scars,” Maylee commented.

“I have more on my back,” I said.

“You have done well waiting for me! Let us go!” Rila decreed.

We hadn’t actually been waiting for her, but regardless, Rila led us into the steamy grand bath.

After Maylee and Rila finished washing their hair, they came to join me.

“Roland, I’ll rinse your back.”



“Wait, Maylee, I shall do that,” Rila cut in.

“I can manage on my o—” I tried to say before Maylee interrupted.

“Then I’ll rinse your other side!”

“Wait, Maylee, you are too young for that. I will clean his front, and you take care of his back,” Rila decided.

“Okay!”

They ignored me entirely and began rinsing my body.

“Up, down, up, down,” Maylee said as she scrubbed, which was rather endearing.

Rila, on the other hand, stopped, glanced down, and blushed.

“...Y-you may take care of that yourself!” she stammered.

She’d been the one to insist on this, but in the end, I had to rinse myself off.

“Roland, do you prefer girls with big boobs like Rila?” Maylee inquired.

“Hmph! Of course he does, Maylee!” Rila answered.

“Don’t answer for me. That’s not necessarily the case.”

“What about tall girls?”

“I’ve never put any consideration into it. There are advantages to being tall or short.”

“Really?”

After rinsing off, I sunk into the bath, and when Maylee and Rila finished washing each other’s backs, they joined me. I couldn’t recall the last time I’d relaxed with a soak like this. It must have been a while.

“Listen here, Maylee, if your feelings have not changed in five years, then you may tell him. But you mustn’t bother an adult,” Rila instructed.

“Then... You can look after him for me until then.”

“‘Until then’? ‘For you’? You may entrust him to me for the foreseeable future. You needn’t take care of him at all.” Rila laughed heartily, earning a hot

water splash from an upset Maylee.

“Bwuh?!”

“You’re so mean, Rila.”

“You are stout of heart to declare war on me,” the demon lord quipped. “I shall give you that...!”

A fight broke out with me at the center, forcing me to stop it before they went all out. “Excuse me...”

Rila and Maylee looked at me and quickly realized there was irritation in my voice.

““Huh?!””

Both of them began to shiver.

“I—I did not intend for any trouble. This all happened because of Maylee’s impudent tongue... She started it,” Rila mumbled.

“N-nuh-uh. She was mean first...”

I splashed some water at Rila, but instead of a small wave, a wall of water crashed over her.

“Wahhh?!” Rila sunk to the bottom of the tub.

“R-Riley!” Maylee cried, trembling. A moment later, she tried to splash me.

When I sent a huge rush of water at her, too, she yelped and ducked below the surface. Not long after, both of the troublemakers emerged.

“Maylee, we must defeat him if we are to survive into tomorrow,” Rila stated.

“Right!”

An alliance had formed against me.

“Fine. Show me what you’ve got,” I declared.

““Hahhhhh!””

We fought an aquatic battle for a while.

Once we were out of the bath, Maylee headed to her room, escorted by her

guards. When I tried to retire to my chamber, the princess tugged on my sleeve.

“I want you to stay with me until I fall asleep,” she said.

“When did you get to be so spoiled?” I asked.

“I get to be, just for today.”

Maylee’s mother was busy, and although she had many people protecting her, she might have still grown lonely. Rila, who was back in her feline form, had left with Roje, likely because they both thought Maylee would be safe in my hands.

The princess clambered into her king-size bed and patted the spot next to her. I did as instructed. She leaned her head on my arm and closed her eyes.

“How long are you going to fight?” she asked.

“I wonder about the answer to that question myself.” I hadn’t put much thought into it, but there was a chance it might continue for the rest of my life. “Until I wash my hands of it all, I suppose.”

“Your hands? But you *just* washed them,” Maylee replied.

“Not in that sense... I think I keep fighting because they still aren’t clean enough.”

Maylee hummed. She sounded sleepier than before. “Will you be done...by the time I’m fifteen?”

“I should hope so.”

She turned and gave me a peck on the cheek. “A good night kiss. Rila says you do it.”

“She didn’t need to tell you that.”

Maylee turned her cheek to me for a kiss.

“Okay, okay.” I pressed my lips to her cheek briefly.

“Oh no, now I’m wide awake again...” Maylee pulled her head under the blankets and kicked her legs.

She finally settled down after some time, and we talked for a bit about

nothing in particular until she drifted off.

I got off the bed, careful not to wake Maylee, and left her to the squad of guards stationed outside the room.

Upon returning to my bedchamber, I saw Dey waiting for me.

“What is it?” I asked her.

“There’s something I want you to see, Master Roland. This...” She handed me a folded piece of paper.

“What is it?”

“A letter from Bale. It seems he kept a few secrets to himself in case something befell us.”

I read through the message. It explained that another letter was hidden under the mattress in the tavern room he stayed in with Dey. He was telling us about it now because he’d reached his hometown safe and sound.

“Here. I took the liberty of retrieving the other message beforehand.” The vampire handed me an envelope.

It had no sender or recipient indicated on it.

“The man had very sticky fingers. He stole it right from the company master’s office,” Dey explained.

Bale’s letter confirmed that. According to him, the envelope’s seal had been broken when he found it, but he couldn’t understand the contents. I pulled out the message, but the paper looked wholly blank.

“I think it’s just a blank envelope and paper. It doesn’t seem like it’s been used. There’s nothing written anywhere. Bale could be a little airheaded sometimes,” Dey remarked.

Nothing written on it? There were signs that the envelope had been cut open. I sensed some mana from the paper, too. I used the spell Match to ignite it, but nothing happened. Then I tried a few other methods, and all of them proved fruitless. The white sheet remained pristine and blank.

“Maybe it really is blank...,” Dey said.

Ignoring that, I kept trying other ideas. Only when I held the letter beneath the moon's glow did bluish-white text appear at last.

"Oh my, my, my..."

"It must have been penned in special ink that reacts to the moonlight," I said.

Dey and I read the contents, and I swiftly realized who the intended recipient was.

It was, without a doubt, addressed to the Welger Company's guild master. The sender's name, on the other hand, was absent.

"I wonder who it's from...", Dey muttered.

I knew the answer. This missive had likely been drafted several months ago.

"Kidnapping of Amster's daughter and assistance...", I read. Barbatos Guerrera was involved, and he was a noble from the Felind Kingdom. "This method of communication, the cipher, and the ink... They're all techniques that assassins employ."

I recalled that the people guarding Ben Amster were hired killers. That went for the assailants who'd attacked Dey and Bale, too.

"Whoever wrote this has some connection to assassins, enough that they know about the community. Or they're one themselves...", I said, thinking out loud.

"The guild master's been so careful. Why didn't he dispose of this letter?" Dey wondered.

"Perhaps he doesn't trust whoever sent it to him."

"So he kept it as evidence?"

"Yeah. Whether this could be used as leverage, I honestly can't say, but the fact that he kept it suggests he thought it'd be useful."

I scanned the second page and then the third.

"Master Roland... Is this...?"

"Yes..."

The contents were all quite damning. Funding, military expansion, destroying Felind, the steps to achieve that, and fellow aristocrats who were sympathetic...

“It seems to be a plan for inciting rebellion,” I stated.

Barbatos Guerrera was channeling funds to the Welger Company. Dey had said the enterprise was getting money from an unknown source, and now we knew where.

Basically, the Welger Company was returning the favor by supporting Barbatos Guerrera. It stood to reason that the current guild master had kept this letter as evidence against the noble in case he was ever betrayed. We also knew that the Welger Company aimed to seize control of Bardenhawk’s government.

“Most of the underground guild work was sponsored by the Welger Company. In exchange, the business built up a collection of professionals it could call upon via the guild...”

I heard Dey gulp. “If we let things continue...”

“It’ll mean an insurrection in the Felind Kingdom,” I finished.

Barbatos Guerrera. The aristocrat planning a coup...

Someone mentioned him to me recently.

“I’ll have to ask about this,” I muttered.

“Ask about what? Ask *who*?”

I left without answering.

The first quest I’d arranged for her today had only offered a reward of a thousand rins—a sum too low to rent an inn room. Undoubtedly, she would return to the castle, and I when I asked a servant about it, I learned that Ravi had indeed come back.

Come to think of it, I hadn’t introduced her to Dey.

“Oh, come now, Master Roland. You brought home another girl? What a lecher,” the vampire said when I explained things to her.

“I just happened to run into Ravi and helped her become an adventurer.”

The two of us headed to the room the servant had told me she was in. A knock on the door earned no answer. Inside, the space was empty.

However, I did find a trail of abandoned clothes leading to another room.

"I think...that leads to a bath..."

I opened the door and stepped into a changing room. There was a basket that held a towel and undergarments.

"Hmm. ♪ Hmm. ♪"

Then I heard someone singing. Poorly.

"Ravi, I'd like to ask you something," I called into the next chamber. The girl gawked at me and then at herself, eyes wide with surprise.

"Ahhhhhhh! Why are you here?! Are you peeping on me?! Why did you walk right in?! Wait, this is too direct to count as peeping!"

"Calm down. I just want to ask some questions."

"'Calm *down*'?! You realize I, a tender young maiden, am completely exposed, right?! And you're telling *me* to relax?! Why did you pick *now* to stop by with questions?!"

Ravi turned her back to me and crouched down.

"Oh dear, oh dear. Oh my, oh my. Aren't you a cutie?" Dey said.

Looking over her shoulder, Ravi cocked an eyebrow. "Who's the pretty lady?"

"She's Candice. I call her Dey. Dey, this is Ravishia. But I call her Ravi for short."

"Nice to meet you, Ravi!" Dey greeted.

"N-nice to meet you, too... Hold on, why didn't you stop him from entering?!"

Dey considered the question for a bit. "Well...he's not the type of person who'd stop because someone told him to."

"I—I guess you have a point..." Ravi looked conflicted, as though uncertain whether to accept that reasoning. "B-but I can't talk to him like this!"

"It's okay. You can cover your important bits with bubbles," Dey replied.

“Y-you’re right!” Ravi exclaimed.

Is that really an acceptable solution? Dey had started smiling at some point. *Is she...toying with Ravi?*

Dey cackled as she lathered up the soap.

“Now, we’ll just use this on the sensitive spots, like on your precious chest. Dab, dab, dab. There, all done. Hee-hee... Hee-hee-hee... Ha-ha-ha.” Evidently, Dey couldn’t keep from laughing.

“You’re right! Everything’s hidden!”

Don’t get too excited, Ravi. She’s messing with you.

Not only had this solved nothing, now I didn’t know where to look. The suds were starting to migrate downward...

“Master Roland will be very gentle. Just relax. Surrender yourself to him, and you’ll have a good time.”

“Huh? What? WHAT?”

“Stop teasing her already,” I chided.

I couldn’t let this continue.

“Ravi, just get in the bathtub. I’m not here to ogle your little frame.”

“Don’t call me little! And quit being so bossy!” Ravi covered herself with her arms and kept her back turned to me as she entered the tub.

“The information I need is much more important than your embarrassment. Do you understand the enormity of the situation?”

“How could I?!” she shouted. She tried to splash water at me, but it didn’t reach far enough. “You didn’t think anything was wrong with strutting in on a girl bathing...”

“Everyone looks just about the same in the nude. The most variation is in the bust, around the belly, and the thighs. Most women look about the same everywhere else. Although I didn’t think you’d be hairless.”

“Ugh... H-has anyone taught you anything about tact?!”

“Don’t worry, I’m entirely disinterested.”

“That makes me upset for an entirely different reason... So what are you here for? I don’t think there’s any point in asking you to tell me later...”

At last, we’d reached the reason I’d come here in the first place.

“I want to know more about your former lord.”

“My lord... Oh, you mean Count Barbatos?”

“That’s right. What kind of man was he? What did he normally do? Tell me everything you know.”

“Oh, okay...” Ravi seemed curious about why I was asking, but she recounted all she could. “I don’t know much about him, really. I already told you I was a mage on his retainer, right? I’m not sure how it worked with other nobles, but he had quite a few mages under his command.”

Apparently, Barbatos tasked them with all manner of things, including monster slaying, road maintenance, and other jobs.

“There really were a lot, though. I think maybe two thousand? We all took on many different tasks, and were paid well for it. Count Barbatos hired based on skills, so he didn’t care how old we were or about our pasts. When my teacher was brought on, I also went to work for Count Barbatos.”

It wasn’t too unusual for nobles to surround themselves with mages. They sometimes acted as private tutors to aristocratic children or were installed as advisers. However, Barbatos clearly had too many—an inordinate number, in fact. I recalled the letter mentioned military forces.

“After the war ended, I think there were a tonnnn of mages without people to serve.”

“And Barbatos killed those who failed at a job?” I asked.

“No one actually said as much...but I’m sure he did. Anyone who made a mistake eventually disappeared...”

I’m sure the salary was highly captivating, but one was better off becoming an adventurer than remaining with a noble like that.

Ravi continued, explaining, “I think people are proud to be mages, and working under an aristocrat is kind of its own status symbol. That’s probably why no one left.”

Since Barbatos was using his people and mages to promptly solve any issues upsetting the fiefdom and paying handsomely, public opinion was likely high.

“My teacher felt that way, too, I think. Followed all sorts of orders from Count Barbatos.”

“So, this master of yours, did they also instruct you on how to use your skill?”

“Yes. I was orphaned from the war and all alone, so my teacher took me in and showed me how to use mag...my skill, I mean, and how the world worked.”

This person believed they were teaching Ravi how to cast magic, when really they were training her to use her skill. They also looked after Ravi, raising her.

“How you employ your skill will make a big difference. More than you think. However, it also depends on how much work you put into it, and your talent.”

“Do you think I have a good or bad one?”

“Valuing a skill purely based on its standard specifications is a mistake. Still, a loser skill is a loser skill.”

Why am I remembering this now?

Maybe it was because Ravi’s childhood resembled my own?

“.....”

Barbatos had put a bounty on my head. He was a Felind noble, so it was plausible he’d suffered a loss from the destruction of the underground arena. However, he knew a lot about me for a man I had no connection to. Perhaps someone was colluding with him, another who did know me...

“I look up to my teacher,” Ravi said. “She’s strong, cool, and beautiful.”

“What’s her name?” I asked.

“I’m not sure. She takes different names depending on who asks.”

“...”

This mysterious instructor didn't have a set identity. It was a typical way of keeping others from learning too much about you, but a woman without a name roused my suspicion. *Amy...is it you?*

If she were involved in this, then Barbatos's inexplicable knowledge of me and his use of assassins' communication methods made more sense. The letter stated that Barbatos intended to destroy Felind. My pupil, the great hero-princess, lived in that very country. I'd felt confident that nothing major could happen there with Almelia around, but...

A plan to topple Felind...

Amy's possible involvement with Barbatos changed things. If she did something to Almelia, the symbol of peace, then...

"Is your teacher still working with Barbatos?" I questioned.

"Yeah. I think so... Wait, what's wrong, Roland? That look on your face is scaring me..."

Infiltrating and gathering information would be a high-risk mission. It was best that I handled it myself.

Is this what you meant back then, Amy?

"Should you continue to complete these jobs and pursue your ambitions, I'm sure you'll become a man capable of defeating me in a decade."

"...I'm sure I'll be dead in that time. Even if I do survive, I can't imagine beating you."

"Ha-ha. I'm sure you feel that way now, but if you don't, it'll spell trouble."

"...Why's that?"

"Because that's my dream."

Don't worry.

If the time comes, I will kill you.

5

Infiltration

I headed to Sandor, a town Barbatos Guerrera controlled near Felind's western region.

Military recruitment flyers were all over the place, with compensation prominently listed. It wasn't usual for an aristocrat to have personal troops, but they often shared the same duties as adventurers. Considering the cost of keeping a standing private army, calling upon the guild was less expensive. Thus, personal troops had become uncommon over time.

Since it seemed I would be leaving Bardenhawk and its capital, Izaria, for a while, I'd spoken with Iris about taking a monthlong break. The labor shortage at the guild had started to abate, so she allowed it. Milia was doing well with teaching the new employees, and they were readily improving, too. At the end of the month, two of my coworkers were scheduled to return to our branch office in Lahti.

We were steadily replacing the Felind employees with Bardenhawk locals, gradually moving toward self-sufficiency. Everything was going smoothly.

"The towns under his command all feel the same," I remarked to myself. I'd already inspected a few settlements in the region under Barbatos's rule, and each had appeared on the level.

The lord resided in an old castle that was visible in the distance. The bounty he'd placed on my head suggested he was very cautious. I was sure he would have countermeasures to fend off any potential infiltrators.

While I could have used my skill to sneak in, Amy, my teacher, was likely with Barbatos. Any reckless moves risked my discovery. That meant I'd have to collect information indirectly and wait for my chance.

According to Ravi, anyone with a proper introduction qualified to take the

exam to enter Barbatos's direct guard. I didn't have any status to call upon, so I'd have to start as a general soldier and work my way up.

The recruitment flyers advertised rolling admissions. All I had to do was head to the designated area for an assessment.

I went to the military quarters, where the recruiters took applications from anyone interested.

Eight other men stood ahead of me at the entrance. They were all somewhat worse for wear and appeared like beggars. An aristocrat's troops would have no want for food, after all.

This was the downside of advertising so widely.

Those in the line entered the building one at a time, and each exited almost immediately with slumped shoulders.

"Next."

A man who looked like a soldier called me in, and I was led to a seat across from a mustachioed knight. Another younger knight sat next to him and said, "First, your name and age. Then tell us what experience you have in military service."

"Yes, Anry Everton," I answered. "Twenty-two. I was with Felind's allied forces during the war—fifth army."

I suppose the recruiters had seen only vagrants up until now. The knight with the mustache let out a slight hum. He fit the stereotype of a man in charge of town guards. He'd likely never been in a real battle. I could tell as much immediately from how he acted and the air he gave off.

"Any weapons you specialize in? Or a useful skill? Or any magic you're good at—if you can use any," the young knight inquired.

"I'm no good at magic... However, I'm quite proficient with a dagger."

I didn't need a weapon, but I had confidence in my proficiency with short blades.

The two knights shared a surprised look.

“A dagger... Hmm...,” the older knight remarked with a sneer.

“Yes, is there something wrong with that?” I pressed.

“Which unit did you fight under? A medical one? A scalpel isn’t a dagger, you know.”

“Heh-heh,” the younger knight chuckled under his breath.

Medics didn’t carry scalpels on their person, but I gathered they were being sarcastic.

“I fought on the front line,” I answered.

Apparently, this was taken as a joke, and the two men burst out laughing.

“Ha-ha-ha! I see! I see! Are you so intent on enlisting that you’re willing to lie? Ha-ha-ha...”

“Captain, don’t laugh. Show some pity for the poor guy. Ha-ha... Maybe he’s even telling the truth.”

“He has no skill with magic and fights with a dagger? No soldier like that would’ve survived the war. That’s nonsense straight from someone who’s never seen a battlefield.”

“But he’s the best we’ve had so far, Captain. There’s been no end of people lying to get in.”

“Yes. He’s the best today and probably the most entertaining interview to date.”

I glanced at both of them as they chuckled.

I invoked my skill. I’d be sure to wipe those grins off their faces soon enough...

“Uh, so, Mr. Anry, was it? Unfortunately—” The younger knight was about to tell me I hadn’t passed.

Before he could finish, I appeared between the pair of recruiters. They didn’t even notice that I’d left my chair.

Drawing each of the knights’ swords, I pointed them at their necks.

“Like you said, I’m very weak, so I might not be able to do much,” I stated.

““ ...”

Their bodies went rigid, yet their eyes bugged out as they scanned the room, trying to figure out what had happened.

“However, I’m sure I could make myself useful,” I added.

The older knight opened and closed his mouth like a fish.

“I don’t suppose you’ve had anyone resort to this particular method of enlisting?” I asked.

Both men looked pale. Their earlier grins were gone. I returned their swords to their sheaths and clapped both knights on the back.

“It was just a little joke,” I assured them. “Don’t take it all too seriously, please.”

The knights were sweating, and each took a deep breath. After wiping his face with a handkerchief, the older one with the mustache asked, “Wh—who are you...?”

“I’m sorry. I was testing you earlier,” I replied. “Felind only had four armies during the war. Were you not aware of that?”

“Uh...,” was his only reply.

This town was situated well beyond Felind’s borders, far from the fighting. The war had surely felt like an entirely different world to people living here.

“I—I see... So your skill... It allows you to teleport?” the younger knight inquired.

I returned to my seat. “I can’t answer that. But when it comes to how I do things, I’m most accustomed to daggers.”

“A-according to rumors... Well, I’m not sure if it’s true or not, and it’s more like an urban legend, but I’ve heard the fifth army did exist...,” the younger knight said.

“What? Did it?” the knight with the mustache responded, which earned a “yes” from his younger peer.

No one among the general population had known of it, and it was informal,

but a fifth army had indeed existed.

“The rumors were completely ridiculous, though... They claimed that the entire force was made up of a single man...”

“You’re saying an entire army corps with troops numbering in the tens of thousands was matched by one person?”

“Yes.”

Naturally, I was the fifth army.

I hadn’t always traveled with Almelia and her party of heroes during the conflict. When the fifth army appeared on the front lines, it meant a crucial enemy commander would die. It was quite amusing to watch the chaos after the opposing forces lost their chain of command and the allied forces overran them.

The two knights shared a look, then returned their attention to me. Despite sneering earlier, I spied fear in their eyes now.

I raised both my hands as though surrendering. “...The fifth army thing was just a joke. Really, I made that up. I was one of those medics who went around calling a scalpel a dagger.”

I was admitted on the spot.

That interview portion likely existed to filter out beggars.

According to the knight with the mustache, new recruits trained on the city’s outskirts. I would be taken there to participate as a fresh trainee.

During the course of my life, I somehow went from learner to teacher. It had been a while since I was as a pupil. Something about the experience felt fresh.

I’d wondered how many new recruits there were, and upon arriving at an open field at the edge of town, I saw roughly one hundred men assembled.

“So these are my colleagues, then.”

Some of the people gathered didn’t seem capable enough to pass an adventurer exam; others’ appearances suggested they were the rough-and-tumble sort. Everyone was undoubtedly here because working as a private

soldier meant a salary. They'd never go hungry, something that couldn't be said of the adventuring life.

I joined the group at the back. Meanwhile, several knights who seemed to be the senior officers came by to divide us into groups of twenty.

"I'm Daz, and I'll oversee your training," called the man in charge of my squad, grinning as he did. "I'm gonna whip you all into shape, got thaaaat? First, we'll figure out just how strong each of you is through a fight with me. We've brought in wooden swords and sticks, so choose your weapon."

A stir ran through the recruits, and many looked at each other.

Daz appeared quite confident, and his voice was thick and relaxed. "Any one of you can start." None volunteered, however. "What? Nobody wants to try? Did you forget you joined an armyyyy?"

"Then I will," a serious-looking man said as he picked up a wooden sword.

Daz readied the two swords he carried, but kept them in their sheaths.

Hmm.

Apparently, Daz's challenge hadn't been a bluff. As soon as he made a move, the other man's wooden sword went flying.

"Huh?!"

"What's the matterrrrr? Done alreadyyyy?" Daz struck the man in the side.

"Guh... I—I give up..."

"What was that? Couldn't hear yaaaa!" Daz began to make sport of the man. He struck the recruit hard in the face, then pummelled the man's arms, stomach, and legs.

"Hey, Teach! That's enough, ain't it?" someone yelled.

"Eh?!" Daz scowled. "If you wanna stop me, then try."

"All right, I think I will."

"Trainees are nothin' but dead weight on a battlefield! And I'm gonna beat that into yaaaaa!"

A glance informed me that Daz was stronger than any of these new soldiers. And these fights were the proof.

“Ah!”

The end of a sheath hit the recruit in the solar plexus. That was the second man down and writhing in pain.

“Come on! Come on! Where’s your connnnnnnnfidence?” Daz beat on the helpless trainee.

The other new soldiers lost the will to fight when faced with the grisly training.

Daz raised the sheath. “What’s wrongggggg? Are none of you gonna say anythinggggggg?”

If he brought his weapon down again, it would ram through the back of his helpless opponent’s head. I sped from the back of the group to get between the two fighters.

Fwoom. Just as the sheath was about to connect, I blocked it with my hand.

“Huh? When did you...?” Daz’s eyes went wide, and he backed away.

“Beating discipline into people is certainly one method of training... I can’t deny that much.”

“So you want a turn, huhhhhh?”

“However, doing this merely for your own enjoyment isn’t training at all.”

“You wanna do this without a weapon? Fine, then I’ll staaart!”

Clearly, Daz didn’t intend to actually speak with me. To him, the recruits were as good as punching bags.

As soon as I dodged one scabbard, the other came at me from another angle. Daz wasn’t swinging his swords at random. It was clear he knew how to wield them.

I read his movements from the speed of his strikes and the path each sword traced, then sidestepped the attacks, stopping them with my pointer finger.

The crowd of new soldiers gasped.

“H-he stopped him?!”

“And with a single finger.”

“I see...!” Daz remarked, as though coming to a realization. “You must specialize in hand-to-hand combat—a martial artist, then...! That’s why you came in unarmed!”

“No, you’re mistaken,” I corrected.

“...”

“I’m not a martial artist.”

People started to laugh.

“The boss has no idea what he’s talkin’ about!”

“Pathetic.”

Daz cast a sharp glare in the direction of those comments. “Hey! Who said that?! Were you talkin’ about me?!”

“Who else would we be talking about?”

Some more quiet chuckles issued from the crowd.

A vein throbbed on Daz’s forehead as he tried to stomp over to the recruits. I grabbed him by the face before he had the chance, however.

“Guh?!”

“It’s my turn now,” I told him.

Releasing Daz only seemed to infuriate him. He growled something guttural and lashed out with his two swords again.

Some teacher he was.

I picked up a wooden sword on the ground and met the attack.

“Gahhhhhh!”

After witnessing Daz’s motions several times, evading and parrying were easy. Angling the wooden sword slightly when deflecting incoming blows unbalanced him in no time. Then I stuck out my foot and knocked Daz to the dirt.

“Dual wielding is a flashy way to make yourself look more powerful, but it means dividing the force you could have achieved with a two-handed grip,” I said, thrusting the wood blade into the ground next to Daz’s head. “There’s no value to an attack that can’t inflict a mortal wound. Wouldn’t you agree, sir?”

Any opponent would fear you if they knew a single hit meant death. But on the other hand, if the enemy knew your blows wouldn’t kill them, it granted them a psychological advantage.

“I don’t recommend dual wielding. It’s akin to advertising yourself as ineffective. Unless your aim is making a show of some acrobatics, that is.”

“Grrr...” Daz gritted his teeth and spread his limbs,

“Whoa!” the crowd exclaimed. At some point, even the other groups of recruits and their instructors stopped what they were doing to observe.

“Daz is actually admitting he lost.”

“But Daz the dual-wielder’s the best fighter in town...”

“Sounds like we’ve got a pretty special new recruit with us!”

Was this guy really supposed to be that powerful?

“Lookin’ down on me, are ya?! Grahhhhh!” Daz stood, eyes red from anger, and bared his teeth. He drew his swords from their scabbards. It seemed he was intent on killing me.

The instant he tried to attack, I struck him under the chin with the wooden sword and felt bone crack. Then I aimed for his shins and both arms, breaking each in turn. Daz didn’t so much as scream. His eyes rolled back into his head, and he collapsed to the ground face up.

“Wh-what just happened...?”

“Daz tried to attack, but then he fell over unconscious...?”

If Daz genuinely was the strongest around, then none of the spectators were capable enough to see what I’d done.

The brutish trainer would probably have trouble eating for the next two months, but that was a fitting punishment for torturing enlistees in the name of

getting them combat ready.

“You know, Daz isn’t a bad guy. He just goes a bit too far when he’s worked up.”

“Yeah. And no one could touch him when he got like that.”

Once training was over, the other instructors took me to a crowded bar with an industrial feel.

After the fight, Daz and the recruits he’d beaten were carried to the barracks infirmary for treatment. The recruits were bruised and swollen, but their bones were intact. Daz, however, didn’t look very injured, but he had a broken bone for each blow from my wooden sword.

One of the instructors slapped me on the back. “How did you beat Daz to a pulp like that? Who even are you?”

“I suppose... You could say I’m a journeyman and an expert in hand-to-hand combat.”

My fight with Daz had drawn a lot of attention. The instructors were unlikely to believe I was an amateur.

“So you’re one of those true believers in martial arts?”

The whole group eyed me with undisguised curiosity.

“Nothing quite so dramatic,” I replied.

““Whoa...,”” all of them replied.

“I bet you traveled all over on a journey to master your craft...”

“And yet you’re so humble.”

“Most people who figure out they’re powerful, even if only a little, start to get full of themselves. You don’t seem like that, though, Mr. Anry.”

Anry? Right, that’s my current alias.

It seemed that a few drinks had loosened the instructors’ lips, so they were more than happy to answer my questions.

“Soldiers? How many have we got again? Maybe three thousand?” one

instructor said.

“Yeah. I think it’s thereabouts. Personally, I think it’s too many.”

“Why has his lordship gathered such a large force?” I pressed.

They all looked at one another and shook their heads, each hoping someone else could provide the reason.

“He also assigns his troops to guard any supply transports. Guess he prefers to use people he’s trained and trusts over adventurers.”

“Yeah, he probably wants his soldiers to slay monsters and handle any bandits instead of filing quests with the guild.”

All the instructors shared this belief, thinking it was the best possible explanation. The idea their lord was planning an insurrection hadn’t crossed their minds.

Supplies...

Inciting a rebellion undoubtedly demanded a lot of resources.

If I asked too many questions, the instructors might grow suspicious, so I left the conversation at that. It seemed I had a long road ahead of me.

I asked the instructors about themselves and learned they’d all fought in the war. Soldiers had been paid very little during the conflict, despite safeguarding the populace during an invasion. Then, once the fighting stopped, they were deemed unnecessary and cast aside.

Militaries in every country were scaled down after the war, and a lot of soldiers had to find new jobs. The recruitment flyers went up right as those affected men were nearing the end of their savings.

The instructors asked me where I came from, so I told them the truth. They’d never feel close to me if they didn’t know that much, and I wanted to earn their trust.

“My teacher reared me deep in the mountains and had me spend my days training. The war started sometime after I left her, so I joined the military. I met many people there, and after the fighting, I desired a new way to use my abilities for the greater good. That’s when I spotted a recruitment flyer,” I tried

to sound as virtuous as possible. The story's first half was genuine, but the latter portion was a lie.

"You had a teacher deep in the mountains..."

"And trained every day..."

"And wanted to use your talents to help..."

From what I could tell, the instructors had built me up in their minds as some kind of martial arts expert or the like.

They all exchanged serious looks, and one of them nodded.

"Mr. Anry, could we ask you for something? Would you train the soldiers?"

"Me?"

I certainly hadn't expected that.

"We're all self-taught, so none of us are great at teaching."

"Right. Plus, you already beat Daz."

"I'm sure we can entrust them to you, since you've worked so diligently to grow stronger."

"You seem possessed of excellent self-discipline, too."

"But...what would your superior officers think?" I asked.

"Don't you worry about that," one of the instructors said with a laugh. "I'm the highest-ranked training officer in this region. So will you do it?"

"With you in charge...I think we might improve..." another trainer entreated, and the rest quickly chimed in with their own thoughts.

"I'm sure we will. This guy is so fast that you can't even see his moves."

"You really think we'll get stronger...?"

"Wait, wait, he hasn't even agreed."

"Oh, right," someone else remarked, which heralded another burst of laughter.

"Come on, you guys... Now you've got me daydreaming about becoming as

strong as *the* hero Princess Almelia. If I had been, I might not have lost so many friends.”

Honestly, I was no different. There were many times I lamented my powerlessness. I could have saved plenty more had I been a little quicker or stronger. I might have rescued entire villages and towns that were destroyed. I recalled my past self and how I’d aspired to grow.

I was no different from these men. I couldn’t dismiss their feelings, not when they were so genuine.

“All right. If you think I’m up to it,” I answered.

During the war, Almelia and Elvie, who primarily engaged in the melee on the front lines, had failed to improve at first, so I’d assigned them a training regimen.

“I hope tomorrow never comes...”

“Almelia, I’ve started to reconsider who I am and why I’m even here...”

“Me too...”

““ ... ””

““I just want to run away...””

Before they went to sleep, both girls cried into their pillows each night.

Even if I trained these men and they were forced to take part in an insurrection, they wouldn’t be the ones in the wrong. The responsibility fell to Barbatos Guerrera. Regardless, I was here to stop things before they reached that point.

I saw joy spread over the instructors’ faces. They made a big show of my agreeing to help and ordered another round.

“But it won’t be easy,” I warned them. “You should be prepared for that.”

“We know,” one of the men replied.

Perhaps it was soft of me to let an emotional appeal sway my decision.

The day after enlisting, I found myself on the teacher’s side of the daily training. I was excited about the prospect of being a student for once, but my

career as a recruit ended quickly.

The new sign-ups were assembled in the same clearing as the rest of the local troops. Any troops not present were on guard duty, but the total collected approached two hundred soldiers. The rest of Barbatos's force was divided among other regional settlements. A town—not even a city—like this would typically never host so many soldiers.

When they saw me, the troops began to whisper and stir.

“That’s the guy who did in Daz.”

“Apparently, he moves and attacks so quick that you can’t see him.”

“You’ve got to be joking...”

“Huh? Didn’t he enlist with us yesterday?”

“Yesterday? You mean he’s brand new?”

“What the...? That’s nonsense...”

The training leader shouted at the troops to silence their chatting. “Quiet! This is Anry Everton, special platoon leader. He’ll be overseeing your exercises from now on!”

I didn’t recall being given that particular title...

“Platoon leader...?!”

“And it’s only his second day.”

“This has to be a joke...”

“What in the devil...? How did he get promoted that fast...?”

I shared the crowd’s sentiments. Truthfully, I would’ve preferred to enjoy my time as a recruit for a little longer.

Evidently, the man in charge was the equivalent of a company commander.

“Teach, you may take the floor...” The training leader bowed to me and stepped back.

“Teach?”

“Teach...?”

“Why are they calling him ‘Teach’?”

Now the soldiers were making even more of a commotion.

“I’m Anry Everton,” I called. “The training we will endure over the next few days will likely be the worst experience of your lives. And that’s how you should think of it. If you’d like to abandon your pride, then by all means, leave now. I promise that those who stick it out until the end will progress as soldiers, as men, and as human beings!”

I rarely took the spotlight like this, but shouted as though giving an arousing speech. I tried to channel Elvie, who was better at this type of thing.

The whole place went quiet. Something about the atmosphere had changed. The soldiers shuffled, clicking their bootheels together to stand up straight. I expected them to be unimpressed with me, yet instead saw vigor brimming in their eyes.

So my speech *did* raise morale. I was convinced these people were here for the salary. However, now I understood that wasn’t wholly the case. I thought about it and realized the recruiters rejected those who applied merely for the money.

The training proved difficult for the men. I had them run through a pathless mountain for a week after determining they weren’t ready to practice with proper weapons yet.

I expected complaints about the simplicity of the exercise or that I was underestimating the men, yet I heard no such grievances. During my time training the two ladies from well-off families in the party of heroes—Almelia and Elvie—there’d been no end to the gripes, and they began on the first day.

Once the soldiers grew accustomed to the exercises, I taught them hand-to-hand combat. They had a will and ambition that differed entirely from the adventurers at the guild.

I always joined in during practice and gave the men pep talks as we went. That clearly affected the soldiers because...

“Teacher! Would you check my stance?!”

“Teacher! I’m sorry to bother you, but would you spar with me?”

“Teacher! I want to tell this girl I love her, but I have no idea how...”

...for some reason, they kept coming to me looking for advice.



A month had passed since I became an instructor, and I’d started taking on work beyond overseeing training and the occasional guard jobs.

“We got a job to guard and transport some supplies,” the company commander stated. He was in a meeting room within the barracks on the outskirts of town. Most of the troops, myself included, lived in military lodgings. I was with the company commander, as were three platoon leaders.

“Most of the supplies are provisions. We’ll take those to the designated area.”

The Adventurers Guild often handled tasks like these, too.

“Provisions? Is there a shortage somewhere?” I asked. However, the company commander shook his head.

“No, there’s no scarcity issue. I believe we’re preparing against potential famine. The contents are all dried meats and root vegetables—enough for someone to get by, if nothing else.”

I kept silent and listened. I learned this was a regular assignment and that the food would be delivered to specific collection sites.

Generally, rations were brought straight to their destination and rarely changed hands. That this occurred so frequently suggested to me that it might be a contractual arrangement.

“The crates are in the storehouse next to the barracks. You can take a look if you have time.”

Another platoon would be handling the acceptance of the supplies and their transport, and the meeting concluded quickly.

I took the commander up on his suggestion. I’d lived here for a while, but this was the first time I went inside the storehouse. Supposedly, it contained

emergency provisions.

I greeted the guards at the storehouse, then headed in.

Many large boxes were piled up, and each had a mark indicating its place of origin. Half of them came from famous towns, with the rest having traveled from less notable places.

“They should’ve just said upfront that these were weapon shipments.” I opened one of the boxes to inspect the contents. “As I thought.”

The crate was packed with swords. A second contained spears, while a third was full of bows and their strings. Curiously, the number of weapons far exceeded the total troop count.

And these shipments had come in fairly recently.

The weapons were likely being secreted in with the provisions, and I doubted that would stop anytime soon.

“This is no small effort. I guess preparation has been proceeding steadily in secret.”

...

I glanced at one corner of the room, spying a shadow.

“Hey.” Did he think I wouldn’t notice? Perhaps I’d caught him off guard by visiting unannounced.

“Come out. I see you,” I said.

A man slipped out from the shadows of the piled boxes.

“I should’ve known you’d spot me, Teach...”

“You enlisted the same day as me. What are you doing here?” I questioned.

He seemed to have realized I meant him no ill will, so he began to explain, though reluctantly.

“I was doing a little investigating.”

“...Under whose orders?”

“Let me ask you a question first: Why did you come to this town, Teach?”

“I have no obligation to answer that,” I replied.

Was someone else conducting an investigation similar to mine?

“A certain person believes there’s something illicit occurring here,” the man said, “and they’ve ordered me to learn more.”

“...You mean King Randolph?”

“...”

Evidently, I’d guessed correctly. The king was smarter than he let on.

“That makes this easier to explain. Tell him not to make any rash moves,” I added.

“...Who are you...?”

“Let’s just say I’m someone who seeks to be *normal*. He’ll understand.”

The man asked me nothing more. Spies understood that it was best not to know more than necessary. If an enemy captured him, there was a chance he’d be forced to reveal all his secrets.

The man nodded and used a skill to disappear, passing through the wall.

“So even King Randolph is keeping an eye on the unnatural flow of supplies.”

I gazed up at the stack of rations and weapons.

First, I’d need to do something about these storehouses.

◆ King Randolph ◆

“Your Majesty...”

A man visited me in the middle of the night.

I’d been working on some documents, so I paused in my efforts. I was glad he hadn’t walked in on me with a woman.

“What is it? Did you find anything important?”

Since learning that nobles in various regions were engaged in illegal activities, I’d deployed veteran spies to investigate. This one had been looking into

Barbatos Guerrero.

“Guerrera’s fief is procuring a large number of supplies, both foodstuffs and a stockpile of weapons.”

“So you think he does mean to rebel?”

“Well...during my investigation, I encountered a man who said to inform you to not make any rash moves.”

“Rash moves?”

“Yes,” the man confirmed. “I thought he might have been another one of your agents.”

“I’ve only sent one person to each region. You should be the sole spy in Guerrero’s fief.”

“Is that right? He said that you would know who he was once I told you that he seeks to be *normal*.”

Seeks to be normal...? I realized who it was at once.

“Ah, yes, I see. Yes, in that case, we must trust his judgment.”

“Is he really that important of a man?”

“We cannot get in his way,” I answered.

“He calls himself Anry, and Barbatos’s soldiers regard him as their teacher. He seems to hold quite a bit of sway.”

“Mm-hmm. I thought he was away in Bardenhawk... He must have sniffed out something amiss and gotten involved of his own accord.”

“He hasn’t been there for long, but he’s strangely charismatic—there’s something charmingly enigmatic about him that’s garnered popularity with the local soldiers.”

“Ah, I think I understand what you’re getting at.”

Roland was, to put it simply, very cool. Enough to garner respect from other men. No, not in that way. No, really, though.

Regardless, something was going on in Barbatos’s domain that was important

enough for Roland to set aside his work in Bardenhawk...

“Even if they plan on launching a rebellion, we have Almelia. Surely Barbatos understands that much.”

“Perhaps the aim isn’t to seize total control of the country, but to have Your Majesty concede to their interests in a negotiation?”

“No, that wouldn’t be enough to appease him.”

In truth, I didn’t know Barbatos Guerrera well. He was the scion of a ruined noble family, had been adopted into the Guerrera household, and was in his thirties—that’s where my knowledge ended. He’d made little impression in the past.

“What would you like me to do now?”

“Hmm... Stick close to this man who seeks to be *normal* and help him as you are able. Report to me on his activities every once in a while.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

With that, the spy disappeared.

“Almelia, who is the supposed greatest military asset in the world, and the high cleric Serafin both reside in the castle, and yet...”

Actually, I wanted Serafin to depart for her home or church sooner rather than later. She had made the wine cellar her private chambers. The casks would run dry in another half year’s time...

“Does this mean...that Barbatos has a mightier army than I do?”

Considering the stockpile of food Barbatos had been hoarding, I decided the matter demanded further investigation.

6

The Sandor Incident and the Unstoppable Specter

I'd concocted a little plan for the heap of supplies in the storehouse. To prep, I used my day off to return to Bardenhawk.

By now, I'd won over around 30 percent of Barbatos's soldiers. First, I'd used word of mouth. Then, I earned the others' respect through patrol work and training. Across all the local settlements, there were about a thousand soldiers in all.

I only needed my own platoon and one other to enact my plan successfully, but at some point, the scope of everything had grown much too large. And although this was technically a miscalculation, it ultimately proved to be a happy accident.

I rang the bell in the room. Shortly afterward, I heard the sound of scattered footsteps as one of my men hurried in.

"Teacher! Do you need anything?!"

I'd been given my own set of trusted assistants who were available to help at a moment's notice. They were there at the ready to hoist my bags, care for my personal steed, or fulfill any other task I set them to.

They seemed to adore me, and they weren't the only ones. Barbatos Guerrera's personal foot soldiers were steadily becoming my own private army.

"I'd like to talk with all the platoon captains in town. Could you ask if they'd be willing to gather?"

"Yes, sir!"

After I told him of the four villages to check in with, the man clicked his boots

together, stood at attention, and rushed off.

About thirty of the platoon captains assembled in the barracks for the meeting.

“What business do you have with us today?” one of them asked, voicing what all the others were surely thinking.

I started off with a question: “Do you all want to go to war again?”

None of them seemed to understand what I was getting at. They looked to their neighbors, perplexed.

One of the younger platoon leaders raised a hand. “We don’t want to, but if we must, then there’s no helping it. That’s why we’ve worked so hard under you, sir.”

A majority of the captains gave scattered nods of agreement.

“All right. Everything I’m about to tell you is of grave importance to the Felind Kingdom. More importantly, all of it is true.” I told them of the connection between Barbatos Guerrera and the Welger Company, then showed the letter I’d obtained as proof.

“Th-the count is...inciting insurrection?!”

“This can’t be true...”

“But...it’s exactly as you’ve told us, sir...”

The ink on the missive would only reveal itself beneath moonlight. Its contents evidently gave a new level of credence to the whole alleged conspiracy.

I asked the now speechless officers, “Why is it that this is the only region actively recruiting so many soldiers?”

“Surely it’s because adventurers are unreliable, and the count hoped to resolve matters with his own men...”

“I’m sure that’s one way to interpret it. Were that the case, however, he’d only need a small force. Every town under his dominion has a standing army of soldiers. Does your lord truly need so many fighters to stand guard and handle

adventurer work?”

A captain next to me must have surmised where I was going and commented, “Guerrera’s army totaled thirty-three hundred strong last month.”

“I—I suppose that is quite a lot...,” another man remarked.

“We don’t even do adventurer jobs more than three times a month.”

“Same with watch duty. Even spread across the villages, there are hundreds of us in each one.”

“I thought we were here to protect against attacks...but really, we have nothing to do. We spend most of our days training...”

At last, they’d realized the situation they were in.

“Just as the letter says, Count Barbatos Guerrera is gathering a military force for an insurrection. That stockpile of weapons and rations is for the coming attack.”

The captains were motionless as they took in my words. Each of them was clearly filled with righteous indignation. Their eyes reminded me of Almelia and Elvie.

Bowing to everyone, I said, “I came here to stop him. I need your help. Please, lend me your strength. I beg of you.”

They responded immediately.

“Of course we will. You never needed to ask.”

“Yeah, I don’t want to fight another war.”

“My men don’t want to, either. I only wanted to get stronger because fighting against the demons made me realize I was weak.”

After lifting my head, I brought it back down again to reply, “Thank you. Just like you all, I want to protect my normal life.”

They all nodded, their minds made up.

I couldn’t let these captains or their charges die, not after seeing that resolve.

“This insurgency can’t be stopped with more fighting. In short, all we need to

do is make sure it can't happen."

I told everyone my plans.

"—And so, your job is to give your people the orders."

This strategy would definitely get me to Barbatos Guerrero. I peered out the window in the direction of the old castle. A straightforward assault wasn't an option because of all the traps and powerful guards surrounding him. My plan would take care of two birds with one stone, though—possibly even three. There was always a method to deal with stubborn targets. It was just a matter of time and patience. And should no opening present itself for you to seize upon, you merely needed to make one.

◆ Barbatos ◆

A servant in the old castle rushed to the count's room.

"Count Barbatos!"

"What's all this racket for?" the count shot the man a sharp glare as he lifted his attention from the work on his desk.

"Were you planning on moving the supplies in the storehouse?" the man inquired.

"What?" The count's surprise was genuine. The only goods that came to mind were the provisions and weapons he'd been gathering to crush Felind. "No, I wouldn't move them. It's not time to make use of those."

He dipped his quill into the ink and attempted to return to his document signing.

"But the soldiers are taking the supplies out of the storehouses," the man added, troubled.

"What?" the count squawked.

"And it's not just here, sir. The same is happening in towns all over. I thought it was your order, Count Barbatos!"

“Obviously not! Make them stop!”

“Yes, sir!” The man scurried from the room.

“The soldiers are acting of their own accord...?”

Even if they were, it was no great cause for worry. Barbatos had amassed a sizable cache. They’d be hard pressed to remove everything.

Barbatos gazed out the window, looking toward a storehouse. Faint, luminous particles of mana hovered about the structure, shining green.

“Wh-what in the world is going on?”

Barbatos had already issued a command to handle this matter, but it seemed this wasn’t the work of a few renegades as he’d mistakenly believed. He furiously rang a bell, and a servant quietly appeared behind him.

“I will be leading my men out to investigate for myself. I must put a stop to this! Guard me.”

The man gave a curt nod and disappeared as soundlessly as he’d come.

◆ Rila ◆

“Lord Rileyla, over here. This is the last place.”

“I shall draw the formation as quick as can be, Roje.”

“Yes, my lord!”

Rila and Roje had followed a map Roland had marked for them to reach the storehouse.

“He really does know how to work a person ragged,” Roje grumbled.

“I do not chagrin him this, as he so rarely relies on others,” Rila said.

“He only asks because you spoil him too much, Lord Rileyla.”

“Now, now, none of that. This is somewhat relevant to our own secret endeavors, after all.”

“I suppose,” Roje replied, looking rather unhappy for the rebuke.

“As I remember, you’re the only one capable of using a Gate to transport people on a large scale,” Roland had said immediately after returning to the castle in Bardenhawk.

“Indeed. Only I have the ability. I can teleport anything that fits within the array.”

“You! Human! What are you planning on forcing Lord Rileyla to do?” Roje had demanded, seeming uneasy.

“I’d like to steal a food supply meant to sustain ten thousand soldiers for half a year.”

Of all things, Roland had wanted to transport a giant amount of rations and weapons to the Duchy of Bardenhawk.

“Draw a large spell for a Gate near a storehouse that I’ll mark for you. That’s all I need. Roje Sandsong, you’ll act as Rila’s guard during that time.”

Rila had been over the moon and requisitioned paints from Hell that were best suited to magic circles in preparation for this day.

“It...seems odd to me that no one has tried to stop us...,” Roje commented.

“A blessing,” Rila decided.

The storehouse had been all but deserted and they had yet to sense anyone approaching. In that time, Rila had been hard at work drawing the array.

“If we abscond with their provisions, then they shall no longer be able to fight. We know all too well how important food is in a war. With this, the battle is won without exchanging a single blow.”

“If there’s no skirmish, then what am I good for...?” Roje lamented.

“No fight is preferable,” Rila insisted. *“And it’s better not to cause one, either.”*

Roje watched Rila work, cheering her on for lack of anything else to do. *“You’re amazing, Lord Rileyla! A splendid magic circle indeed!”*

“Quite! A poorly drawn array weakens the spell. And it would be a sorry thing to allow such stores to waste away in the void. Ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Soldiers, about a hundred in all, marched over while the former demon lord laughed.

“It’s done,” one of them said. “According to Teach, we just need to place the supplies in the circle.”

“All right! Let’s get movin’ before the count’s people come by!”

The men cheered.

Before long, mana particles started to appear close to where Rila began drawing the great array.

“It’s starting, I see,” she said.

“Lord Rileyla, we needn’t linger. Come, let us return to the castle in Bardenhawk through my Gate.”

Rila nodded in approval, and Roje led her away.

◆ Roland ◆

I placed a hand on Rila’s Gate...though the array she’d drawn seemed much too big to call it that. A mountain of wooden crates sat on the circle. When I fed mana into the spell, faint particles of magic began to rise and the array hummed quietly. The supplies disappeared.

Barring a mistake on Rila’s part, the weapons and rations should have been sent to Bardenhawk’s capital. I trusted Rila regarding magic, so I assumed all was well.

The platoon soldiers I was working with stared, their mouths ajar.

“I-it disappeared...”

“I guess it’s kind of like really large-scale teleportation magic...”

“A magic circle this large could transport a whole military corps...”

Since most of Guerrera’s soldiers agreed with my plan to prevent the insurrection, no one tried to stop us.

Elsewhere, different troops were all likely hauling the hoarded goods to the

other arrays that Rila drew.

The circle on the ground faded steadily until it wholly vanished. Rila had made the formation single use. I suppose that got rid of any need for destroying it and prevented misappropriation. Clever, as always.

“Let’s head to the next spot,” I said to the soldiers keeping watch around me. They swiftly gathered, and we moved as a group.

Once the circles were in place, anyone could activate them to transport goods, so long as that person could use magic. Demonic magic was known to be versatile in that way. Many forms of human magic required specialized arrays, theoretical concerns, and procedures to follow. Such spells regularly failed, even when feeding mana into them.

“Heeey! Rolaaand!”

The second storehouse was in sight, and I saw Ravi waving her hand from afar.

I’d asked Rila to bring her over, as well. This little counter-rebellion was all about robbing Barbatos of everything he’d stockpiled, and Ravi, who specialized in defensive magic and buying time, was perfect for our operation.

“How are things going?” I asked her once I was close enough.

“Umm... It looks like there’s a lot in there, so they haven’t been able to bring it all out yet.”

The soldiers had already formed a mountain of weapons and rations, but evidently, that was only half of everything.

I gave directions to the men to help out. Reports had included information about the supply quantity, but now that I saw it in person, it seemed more real. A few of the men had started hauling out crates in the middle of the night.

“Force Field.” Ravi used her skill.

The storehouse and magic circle were both enveloped by a barrier.

“Now everyone can work in peace,” Ravi stated, as though her work here was done.

“Right.”

There were eight storehouses in total. I’d asked Rila to draw a magic circle for each of them. After this one, there were seven more to go.

I looked to the castle, where the count would be. We’d already been at this for quite a while. Surely, he’d notice soldiers going against his orders soon enough. There was too much to move to keep the operation secret, so I’d decided he might as well discover us out in the open.

Even if he sent his forces to stop us, they’d be outnumbered. And with no one heeding his commands, Barbatos was sure to make a personal appearance.

I heard the sound of beating hooves.

“...He’s shown up earlier than expected.”

I saw an aristocratic-looking man riding at the front of a group—probably Barbatos.

We were foiling his plans by stealing his supplies. The gathered resources were to go to the Duchy of Bardenhawk, which was dealing with a severe shortage.

“You! What do you think you’re doing?!”

Barbatos had a fortified castle with traps and spells, a veritable fortress, yet there was no point to any of it now that he’d left its walls.



Barbatos had brought thirty men, all of whom appeared to be mages.

“Count Barbatos...” Ravi, who had once served the count, hid behind me.

“We collected these supplies for the fiefdom’s residents! What do you intend to do with them?!” He dismounted and scowled. “Hmm? This magic...”

He’d noticed Ravi’s skill. Evidently, he, too, incorrectly believed it was magic.

Barbatos thrust out his chin, and one of the mages stepped forward, holding a book as thick as a dictionary as he chanted something. A magic circle appeared

below Ravi's feet, and her skill disappeared.

"Who?! Who is responsible for this?!"

I stopped one of my soldiers with my hand when he tried to respond. "It's a waste letting the supplies sit here to rot in the storehouse. I'm bringing them to a place where they can be used effectively."

"Who the hell are you?! Get to your knees when you are in front of me. Lower your head."

I ignored him. "I teach the soldiers in this town how to fight. I'm a special platoon captain."

"...You hot-blooded idiot," Barbatos spat. Again, Ravi cowered.

The troops who'd been carrying the supplies heard the commotion and stopped to hurry over. Their hard glares told me they recognized the count.

"...Tsk! Why are you looking at me like that?! You worms! The only thing you're good for is fighting!"

To smooth over the situation before anyone drew steel, I stepped between the soldiers and Barbatos. "We're fine here, so please return to your work, everyone."

Immediately, the troops turned their backs on the situation as though it posed no threat to them and returned to the storehouse.

"Whom do you think you serve?!" Barbatos cried. "Get back to your stations, you incompetent buffoons!"

The men stopped when he said that.

"Our stations? We *have* returned to them."

"Funny coming from a traitor trying to start a rebellion."

"We don't serve you, that's for sure."

"We're grateful you employed us, but we didn't join up to start another war."

Barbatos scowled.

"Everyone already knows," I said. "Recognize this?"

I brought out the envelope that contained the plans for rebellion. The one Barbatos had sent to the head of the Welger Company.

“...Not in the slightest. What is it?”

“This is the secret missive you had delivered to the Welger Company’s leader. The soldiers here know about your scheme.”

“They know? About what? Yes, I admit that the guild master and I have a close relationship. Is there something wrong with me sending him a letter? Of course not!”

He was trying to spin this.

“Hey! Stop them from moving that!” Barbatos barked sharply and one of his mages headed to the storehouse.

I stroked Ravi’s head as she cowered. “You’ll be all right. If anything happens, I’ll protect you. So go ahead.”

“...Okay.” Ravi nodded and once again invoked her skill. “Force Field.”

Klang. A transparent barrier appeared and barred the way to the storehouse and the magic circle.

Barbatos glared. “I knew it was you! First you failed in your duties and ran out on us, and now you stand in my way. Useless little wimp! You dare bite the hand that feeds you?! Preposterous!”

“I...did run away... But I know the difference between right and wrong...!”

Ravi’s tone was hushed, but she did her best to speak defiantly to Barbatos. When the count glared at her, Ravi shrank back again.

“That’s what you have to say after I looked after you?! Do you have any idea the position you’re in?! Shame on you!” Barbatos was boiling over with rage. It seemed he was incredibly prideful.

He likely believed those under him were there for exploitation.

“I don’t care what you say... I’ve got someone I want to help...,” Ravi protested meekly.

“You? When the only magic you can cast is a flimsy magical barrier? You think

you can aid anyone? Don't make me laugh!"

Ravi, unable to endure Barbatos's berating, quivered and began to sob.

I looked from the girl to the count.

"...You're right, I'm only good for defense... I can hardly ever make use of my abilities, but that's exactly why I need to put them to use whenever possible. Like now, to stop you."

"Shut up! We'll destroy your little bubble and start by executing you first."

"Please go right ahead," I invited, allowing a small amount of my hostility to show. Barbatos grit his teeth. "What do you take Ravi for? You call yourself a lord, yet you still think her skill is magical? Don't make me laugh!"

Barbatos and his men backed away and fell to the ground as though buffeted by a strong gust. They weren't the only ones affected by my unleashing animosity, either. Everyone had collapsed.

I turned around and saw Ravi was the same as the others.

"Y-you're scary when you're mad, Roland..."

"No, I'm not mad," I replied.

I helped Ravi up, and she mumbled, "Thanks for what you said."

Barbatos was creating a scene outside of Ravi's barrier. "Incinerate the soldiers! Scorch them!"

"B-but Count Barbatos... The town—"

"I don't care. I don't mind burning down a village or two in pursuit of my *grand plan*."

The man who spoke up was either incredibly loyal or already knew of his "grand plan." He nodded solemnly. The mages behind Barbatos, on the other hand, looked grim and shared bewildered glances with one another.

When Ravi's barrier was broken by one of the mages, the others prepared for attack.

"Roland, at this rate..."

“I know,” I assured her.

Ravi invoked her skill again, but it was quickly undone once more.

I stared into Barbatos’s eyes. It seemed he’d been frightened by my shouting at him. He quickly backed away.

“H-hey! Come out and protect me!” Barbatos cried at seemingly no one in particular.

I’d known about the three men hidden in the shadows who’d been watching us. It wasn’t difficult to guess they were guards.

They were all quite skilled. Had I not detected them earlier, fighting the three would’ve been difficult. One of the men emerged from a dark corner and headed to Barbatos’s side.

“Him! Him! Do something about him!” Barbatos pointed at me.

“Count Barbatos, please free us from the obligation of defending you.”

“Wh-what? You idiot, what are you—? What are you saying?!”

“Our duty is to protect you, Count Barbatos...but not to die while doing it.”

“But that’s what I hired you for! You have no idea whether you’ll perish until you try!”

The man quietly shook his head. “No, we know. If he decides to take action, we won’t be able to touch him. The girl behind him called him Roland. How he carries himself, his powers of perception, his paralyzing animosity...everything about him is superior. In the industry, there are whispers of a Phantom Demon Lord Slayer. And I am sure those legends speak of him.”

The Phantom Demon Lord Slayer?

When had I earned such a ridiculous title? Still, it was better than the “Roland gang.”

“H-how powerful is this guy supposed to be?!”

“There’s something about him that is undeniably greater. You should assume that he’s as powerful as *her*.”

“Y-you can’t be serious! Th-this goes against the contract! A breach! I paid

you for protection, and now you've scrapped the arrangement?! No one will hire you ever again!"

"We are aware of that, of course. If we honor our agreement with you, we will face death and you will be executed. Knowing this, we would rather cast aside our reputations and live. That is all there is to it." With that, the leader of the three guards disappeared. I sensed the remaining two depart, as well.

"W-wait! Wait!"

As Barbatos scanned around for the trio, I approached him and tapped on his shoulder.

"Eek...!"

"I'd like you to stop the attack."

"O-okay...fine..."

Barbatos issued the order right away. Ravi had been using her skill where needed, so the fire hadn't spread too far.

"There's somewhere I'd like to take you," I stated. "That fine with you?"

"S-sure..."

I tied Barbatos's hands behind his back.

"Wh-who are you...?" he questioned.

"What are you talking about? I'm the man you were looking for."

"I was looking...for you?"

"You put a bounty on me for destroying your arena."

"What?! Th-that was you?! Do you know how much I lost because of that?!"

"I don't think you'll need to worry too much about any financial losses soon."

"Huh?" Barbatos looked confused.

"I'm taking you to King Randolph. He's already had suspicions about you."

"H-His Majesty would never believe what the likes of you has to say..."

"I think he will after reading this letter. Especially since it's clear as day when

read in the moonlight.”

“No, stop... Please, anything but that...”

I waved the envelope in front of the count’s face.

“I thought you’d never seen this letter before in your life?”

Barbatos let out a groan.

“It’s likely the Guerrera family, and all those within three degrees of relation to it, will face public execution. Your folly has made all of them threats. The young, the old—there likely will be no exceptions.”

“S-stop!”

“You should be happy. Your name will live forever in history. That’s what you wanted, right? The only difference is people will speak of you with disdain.”

I explained everything to Barbatos’s men once we captured them. Most of the mages were astonished to hear their lord’s plan.

“Then the stockpile of weapons and food...was all for his insurrection...”

“His Majesty himself will be punishing him,” I told them.

They all nodded in clear understanding. By now, the storehouse was empty and the supplies were in the magic circle.

I had the mages help with the transport.

“There are a few other caches. I’d like you to feed mana into the arrays to teleport the goods. And don’t worry, the hoarded weapons and food are all part of a surplus.”

I left the mages to finish the job and took Barbatos with me to Felind’s capital by way of a Gate.



“Really now... What were you thinking?”

King Randolph let out a prolonged sigh in the audience chamber, as though he were trying to release all the air from his body.

Several senior military officers sat to the right of him, facing the throne. The king's senior civil service advisers watched from the opposite side. Everyone was staring at Barbatos, who was on his knees.

I observed everything from the farthest seat on the civil service side.

"It hasn't even been long since the Human-Fiend War. And yet you still stirred unrest among the aristocracy, nearly brought about an insurrection, and plotted to overthrow Felind royalty, Count Guerrera?"

"I..." Barbatos's voice was as weak as the whine of a mosquito. "I...was not planning anything of the sort..."

"Then what's this letter?" King Randolph held the proof that I'd handed him.

"..."

"I've been cautious about your recent activities, but hadn't received any confirmation of illicit indulgences until a few days ago. You were using the Welger Company to build supplies for war, and bolstering your troops, as well. It seems the Welger Company even hoped to seize control of the Duchy of Bardenhawk. Had either of you succeeded, the other would have had the backing of a powerful ally."

"That's..."

Although the plot sounded trivial when said out loud, Barbatos had put a great deal of effort into his preparations.

"The Welger Company's master was using me..."

"Oh, he was, huh?" Randolph threw me a look.

"They have a mutually beneficial relationship... Or rather, they did," I replied.

King Randolph turned his eyes back to Barbatos. "I thought long and hard on how it ever came to this, Count Guerrera. Yet I couldn't conjure an answer. I suppose that was to be expected. I don't understand how an egotistical aristocrat focused solely on his own ambitions thinks."

"Y-you! You expect the nobility to be too moral! There were many other lords sympathetic to my endeavors..."

King Randolph looked like he might reply but decided against it. Perhaps he was worried Barbatos's claim was true. To bring the aristocracy's injustices to light for the sake of the common people, he had to rein in those nobles who acted outside the law.

People like Barbatos were, more or less, the equivalent of kings in their fiefs. And unsurprisingly, most of them took offense at even the slightest restriction to their freedom.

Barbatos howled as he raised his head, "The only reason the nobles follow you—reluctantly, I might add—is because of Princess Almelia! You have neither the influence nor the charisma to reign over—"

I approached Barbatos and gave him a hard punch in the face. He let out a strange groan as he flew away, rolled along the audience chamber floor, and hit the far wall before coming to a stop.

"Don't you dare blame someone else for your actions, Barbatos Guerrero. Your plan has failed." I slowly approached him, continuing, "A great number of soldiers and innocent people were nearly sent to their deaths. You were about to take their normalcy away from them and their families. You deserve to die."

I grabbed Barbatos, who was now missing a few teeth, by the collar and shoved him against the wall.

"Now I'm going to tell you what I think. That man there isn't king simply because he's Almelia's father. Remember that. Don't insult my friend."

Apparently, I'd roughed Barbatos up more than I'd intended. He was kicking his feet, which were no longer touching the ground. I threw him back to his original spot on the floor.

"Count Guerrero, we will pursue the matter and give you our decision. In the meantime, you may wait...in prison."

King Randolph motioned with his chin, and soldiers standing at the entrance grabbed Barbatos under the armpits to lead him away.

"E-even if you kill me, this country is already at the center of a maelstrom."

"Shut up." I gave Barbatos a heavy blow to the stomach with my fist. I felt one

of his ribs break.

He slumped over, and the king's guards hauled him off.

The next day, it was decided that Barbatos Guerrera was to be executed in public, surrounded by the masses.

News immediately spread of the loss of his noble station and the seizure of his lands.

The events leading to his death later came to be called the Sandor Incident, named after the town they had primarily occurred in. Barbatos Guerrera's own name would forever be recorded in history as that of a traitorous felon.

After Barbatos Guerrera was thrown in jail, before his execution, I paid a visit to King Randolph's private chambers.

"Do you not understand the general concept of knocking?" he asked, looking quite exasperated.

"Why bother with that now? I've already come in several times without knocking."

"That you have." King Randolph grinned as he sat on a sofa.

The hour had already grown late, and it was dark outside. I sat on the opposite sofa, the low table between us. He called a servant and had them bring in distilled liquor and glasses.

"I won't be staying long," I told him.

"Oh, don't be like that."

I poured the amber liquid from the bottle into the glasses.

"You're surprisingly delicate, King Randolph. A little slander is really enough to depress you?" I remarked casually, which brought a smile to King Randolph's face, though it was self-derisive.

"I've been considering the idea myself lately. Almelia is actually a large influence. There is some credence to the idea that her authority as the hero keeps the aristocrats' dissatisfaction at bay."

We each sipped our drinks, hardly more than sampling the alcohol's taste.

“Of course they’re unhappy. You’ve started tightening their leashes. They want the carrot, not the stick.”

“Roland, what would you do in my situation?” King Randolph questioned.

“I have no idea what an aristocrat would consider a carrot,” I answered. “I think you need to consider that on your own. As for Barbatos...will he be the only one to be executed?”

“Mm-hmm. That is the plan.”

“You’ll need to off more of them or you’ll be sorry later. Keeping them alive is risky. You should crush them now.”

“He has no children, and even if the rest of his family despises me, I know I’ve done no wrong. If someone seeks revenge for my decision to mete out justice, then I will accept it as it comes.”

King Randolph took out Barbatos’s letter, and set it on a low table cast in moonlight. Its hidden text appeared.

“Destroying Felind...and the plans to do so, I see... We’ve only just achieved peace. How he came up with such a deranged idea, I’ll never know.”

To change the subject, I asked, “How is Almelia? I haven’t seen her lately.”

“My dear daughter has left the castle for the orphanage. She is its director, after all.”

“I see. At the end of the hearing, Barbatos claimed that chaos would descend on the kingdom regardless of his execution. It sounded as though he was prepared for that to happen. I never asked him myself, but I take it the plans mentioned in his letter involved getting rid of Almelia.”

We would likely need to torture it out of Barbatos.

“Killing my daughter? Can you think of anyone capable of such a thing besides yourself?”

“There’s a high likelihood that Amy is on Barbatos’s side.”

“Impossible!” King Randolph returned his glass to the table.

I explained my suspicions to him.

“...So you assume she saw you at the underground arena. She’s one of the few who knows your skill and false aliases. I see... Amy... That name takes me back. I never associated with her much myself.”

I hadn’t always been so well connected with Felind’s royal family. My teacher, Amy, had helped with that as part of my succeeding her. Based on what King Randolph said, he hadn’t had many dealings with her.

Honestly, he hadn’t asked much of me, either, but we’d ended up good friends at some point.

“A man as prepared as Barbatos wouldn’t act without a way to get rid of Almelia, considering she’s pivotal.”

“But this is Almelia we’re talking about. You should know more than anyone that she isn’t just some ordinary girl.”

“Yes. Almelia is very good at handling armed groups. However...this would put her against a single person, and she isn’t used to killing. That makes a great difference. Her opponent specializes in taking opponents off guard. Almelia will have a very difficult time.”

King Randolph let out a deep sigh. “Please, enough. You look so serious that it’s troubling me...”

“I’m not the type to sugarcoat things. And speaking man to man, I’m going to be direct. Tell Almelia not to follow any set patterns. And she should, under no circumstances, remain in the castle all the time. Make sure she does something different each day.”

“W-wait, you’re serious...?!”

“Yes. I wouldn’t joke about this.”

When he realized I still had a stern look on my face, King Randolph’s shoulders slumped. “We just broke off the engagement with that dismal prince, and now an assassin...”

“She’s no ordinary assassin. This is someone you absolutely don’t want to go up against—a person even I’m wary of.”

“That’s quite enough... The anxiety makes me want to keel over...”

"I came here to tell you that," I told him.

When I tried to leave, King Randolph asked for me to wait. We shared another five rounds.

"So I'm your friend now?" he said.

"Why do you sound so happy? Are you drunk already, old-timer?" I replied. He seemed pleased about what I'd said earlier in the audience chambers.

"To put it another way, you also believe I consider you a friend."

"All right, enough. You don't have to go out of your way to rephrase things like that." I set my mouth in a tight frown as King Randolph laughed.

Before I knew it, morning was upon us.

I remembered what Rila had said to me once.

"To be a king means being alone."

They were always haunted by having the final say and taking all responsibility. They couldn't shunt critical matters to anyone else.

"If anything happens to me, you take Almelia," the king insisted.

"Hmph. We've gotten into drunk ramblings, I see... No thanks."

"Why not?!"

If anything unfortunate were to befall someone, it was likely to be me.

"Listen here, Almelia's pretty, and she's a nice girl."

"I'm aware. I hope she finds a good match."

"Don't hope! Go snatch her up!"

"That's quite enough for a drunk."

I could be direct when talking with Rila, but that wasn't as true for King Randolph. I suspected King Randolph had no one he could speak with so casually except me.

As the sunlight brightened the room, King Randolph began to snore.

"I know I've worried you, and I will protect your daughter," I told him. "The

people close to me...are precious, and she's my pupil."

I laid a blanket over the king and quietly left his room.

Once I arrived back at Bardenhawk's capital, Rila wasted no time telling me, "We have quite a commotion." She cackled quietly.

I transformed her into her feline form and went with her and Roje to see what the trouble was. We found a long line in the capital's residential area. The line began at the mound of supplies.

Roje offered her version of praise. "Your idea wasn't half bad, human."

"It made the most sense to move Barbatos's caches. The rest simply followed."

"Leyte had the military recover the weapons. All that remains is the food."

"Queen Leyte said that the rations were too much for the castle to hold and decreed it would be divided amongst the people."

The populace had assembled to get some of the food that popped up out of nowhere.

"How thrilling it is to steal from someone hoping to incite a rebellion and bring supplies to a country in poverty. Mm-hmm." Rila nodded.

"Your large Gate was very useful. Thanks," I said.

"Of course, of course. My magical acumen far surpasses anyone else's!"

"We'd been considering a way to help these people already, human," Roje revealed.

"Oh, Roje, you!" Rila batted at the elf's feet in a panic.

"The dried meats and root vegetables will disappear quickly, but Lord Rileyla's gift won't!"

"...Come to think of it, I did notice you two whispering to each other. So that's what you were up to."

"Do not... No, mention no more of this... It is tasteless..."

Despite Rila's protests, Roje continued. "My lord is amazing! Lord Rileyla has

snuck in crops from Hell suitable for this country's climate and soil! And I helped, as well! Eventually, produce shall become an important part of this land's trade and will be exported to other nations. This will become a country of plenty, and the people will have no want for food! Understand, human? They will be free from worry for decades! No, for centuries! Such is how my liege, Lord Rileyla, does things! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"Do not boast, you foolish elf!"

"Wh-why not, Lord Rileyla?! If I do not tell this half-wit of your incredible mercy for a nation in need, then I, Roje Sandsong, would not be doing my duty as—"

"Quieeeeet! You mustn't reveal everything! You tactless elf! Out of my sight!"

Roje seemed unhappy and confused. Her shoulders sank, but she obeyed Rila's orders.

"Hmph," Rila snorted. "Really now! Honestly!" she huffed at her tactless servant.

"Why'd you do all that?" I asked.

"...Even I have the capacity for guilt," Rila answered. "I don't know what these people were like before, but I'm sure that the demon lord's army is responsible for their present destitution."

"So this is atonement then?"

"Hm... Well, something of the sort." Rila looked away as though embarrassed.

That was likely why she hadn't wanted others to know her plans.

She'd imported weilyam, a crop resistant to drought and disease. I had to wonder whether it would take root, being it was a plant from Hell. However, Rila had done her research before introducing it to Bardenhawk.

"Can humans eat the weilyam?" I questioned.

"If they use the absolutely delectable recipes I devised, then anyone can enjoy them," Rila stated.

"Every word of that sentence makes me more worried."

“I suppose you would think that. But I shall feed you some. There will come a time when you won’t know what to do with yourself without me.”

“Ever self-confident, I see.”

“Let us go back,” Rila said, and she turned to leave.

“Someday...I’d like to be the one who gets the final word,” I remarked.

“...I would not mind if that day never came. I am sure the crops will grow well here. That is enough for me,” Rila stated firmly. I responded by picking her up and setting her on my shoulder.

I headed off toward the castle, looking forward to the meal.

7

An Impending Reunion, Part I

The Duchy of Bardenhawk's Adventurers Guild had become more self-sufficient. The number of local employees had also increased, and training made them fine staffers. With less and less to do, it was time for those of us from Lahti to go home. At the moment, the only people left from the Felind Kingdom were me, Branch Manager Iris, and Milia. The rest were all Bardenhawk employees.

"Sir, about this quest—"

Many staffers were training under me now and often relied on my knowledge.

"Teach, this quest is marked as D rank, but this one is the same and is an E rank ..."

Milia, who was "Teach," looked rather flustered as she compared the quest stubs. The nickname had likely come from her taking charge of the rookies' education.

"Huh? Th-that's odd..."

It was rare to see Milia being called teacher, given that most people saw her as still a girl herself.

"M-Mr. Roland, do you know anything about this problem...?"

Milia approached with the two conflicting quest stubs, looking frazzled. A rookie employee behind her seemed much the same.

"They look similar, but the ranks are different..."

"Really...?" I compared them myself.

Both were merchant-caravan guarding quests from the same client. Even the

destination was identical. The only difference was the proposed route.

“Ah, I see. Miss Milia, there is a large difference between E-and D-rank quests. Think it over.”

“A difference?” Milia thought about my words for a moment. She had to know. She’d likely taught this vital point to the new employees.

I didn’t wish to embarrass her in front of a student, so I whispered, “Combat is guaranteed for one.”

“Ohh!”

A smile spread over Milia’s face as she clapped her hands together like it had clicked into place. I didn’t know whether it was because of her personality or how her warm demeanor made guild work a little more enjoyable, but I couldn’t find it in myself to chide her.

“The proposed routes differ,” I explained. “The D-rank one cuts through a place that often requires battle. However, the E-rank quest plans to take a longer way around.”

“Thank you so much!” Milia turned around and explained the same thing I’d just said to the new staff member.

As for Iris, she was training the branch manager who would soon be replacing her, having selected a staffer who seemed to possess the qualities necessary for the position. With guild management proceeding smoothly, the three of us wouldn’t need to stick around much longer.

Initially, no one had understood the concept of a guild for adventurers, yet now the work had become a regular facet of life. The Adventurers Guild had earned approval in the public eye.

“Sir! Would you mind checking this quest stub for me?”

I was handed another inquiry written on a quest stub by one of the junior staffers.

“...”

This one also dealt with merchants. It was a request for guards to protect dealers transporting wares obtained in the capital that were meant to be sold

elsewhere. This merchant had previously been associated with the Welger Company, the very organization I'd been dealing with of late. It seemed they could now do business without going through that troublesome corporation.

This likely resulted from the Bardenhawk Adventurers Guild growing and becoming more recognized as a legitimate entity. Guards were indispensable in a nation where thieves and monsters were common. If a trader put in this same request with the Welger Company, there'd be extra charges that would hurt their profits. Submitting a guarding quest at the guild got them protection at a fraction of the cost.

The greatest advantage was that they could continue their trade with fewer expenses without relying on a company. I checked in with the junior staffer who collected the information from the client to make sure nothing was missed.

"I see no problems," I said.

"Thank you so much!"

The junior staffer headed back to her seat, looking very cheerful.

A few days ago, I'd received a letter from King Randolph about Almelia. He'd heeded my warning and also given Almelia the same advice. However, she was the hero—a *very* self-confident hero, at that. It had surely been difficult for him to convince her to listen.

King Randolph had assigned Frank Lanperd, one of the imperial knight captains, to guard Almelia. I knew Frank was the right person for the job, but I couldn't help but worry, knowing they were up against Amy. In my mind, she was still the same all-powerful master she was back in the day. I couldn't even imagine how to defeat her.

My only hope was that she'd decided to withdraw from the matter after finding out her client, Barbatos Guerrera, had been executed, but that was very unlikely. Growing up, I'd only known her as a parent and a teacher. In the time since, I'd heard rumors of her activities from the little information I'd managed to gather.

She specialized in demanding jobs and wouldn't ask about pay. I was already well aware that my master was a very unusual assassin. She lived to kill

powerful targets and was addicted to the work. That was how she seemed to me, at least.

Had I not done the job, I trusted she could have killed the demon lord. A job like assassinating Almelia, the so-called greatest military asset, would surely have appealed to her.

That she had lost her client, and reward, likely didn't matter.

I'd heard that the person who had kidnapped the fake Maylee was a woman, one who'd seen through Rila's cat form. Amy must have signed up thinking the kidnapped would be amusing. Victor, the man with the Invincible skill, had told me that once her part was over, she'd left immediately.

Then Victor turned up dead a few days after. When I'd found his corpse, the stab wounds gave me goose bumps.

Guild Master Tallow had informed me he saw Amy in Bardenhawk, and now I knew he was right...

"..."

No matter how many times I played out the battle with her in my head, I only survived two minutes before falling.

"...Only if I face her directly, though."

Closing time came arrived, and as I cleaned up my desk, I decided to go see Almelia.

Thanks to a Gate I'd set up earlier within the Felind Kingdom's castle, I could easily slip into the place. I searched for Almelia's familiar presence.

"Ugh, I feel so smothered. By both you and your men."

"Come now, don't say that. This is our job. His Majesty was very insistent."

Almelia and Frank were talking in the dining room.

"But I'm stronger than you," the princess asserted. "Is there even a point to you protecting me?"

"There's strength in numbers, isn't there?"

It seemed Frank was having a rough time dealing with the headstrong

princess.

There were two of Frank's men at the door, and they stood at attention upon seeing me. Perhaps they remembered me from when I'd shared a meal with King Randolph. Neither protested as I opened the door and headed in.

"Hey! You were supposed to be guard...ing?"

"Roland! Y-you should give us notice if you're visiting! Seriously! You always drop in unannounced." Almelia stood, looking quite joyful.

Frank still had his short, thin goatee.

"I'm sorry for interrupting your meal," I said.

"What are you here for, Roland? Are you protecting her, too?"

"No, but I thought of something that might be helpful."

"R-Roland, are you here to keep me safe?" Almelia asked.

"Weren't you boasting about how powerful you are a moment ago? What happened to that haughtiness?" Frank smiled, though it was forced.

"I believe King Randolph told you to keep your schedule irregular, right?" I asked.

"Yeah. I've avoided going to the orphanage, staying in the castle, training, or anything that would give me a pattern."

I nodded. "There is only one way to ensure you'll never repeat the same actions."

""What's that?"" Almelia and Frank asked together.

"Become an adventurer."

"Fine by me!"



“Sure was a quick decision...” Frank let out an exasperated sigh when Almelia agreed without even hearing me out.

Many people who became adventurers took various odd jobs for a living, so each day was different. That applied to more than half of them.

“...An adventurer?” King Randolph looked dubious.

When I brought the idea to him, he cocked an eyebrow, surely thinking it odd that Almelia was so pleased with the proposal. Almelia, Frank, and I were with King Randolph in his personal chambers.

“Yes. That’s right. Adventurers take different quests each day. And guild employees are the ones who choose those jobs for them.”

“Hmm,” King Randolph looked at Almelia. “She told me you’d forbid her from becoming one when she abandoned her public duties to visit you...”

I recalled that the princess had once forced her way into the Lahti branch’s office. That was likely what King Randolph was referring to.

“She abandoned her duties?” When I looked at Almelia, she awkwardly avoided my gaze.

“Uh, that was, um...,” she stammered.

“But the circumstances have changed, isn’t that right, Roland?” Frank said.

I nodded. “If I arrange quests for Almelia, I’ll make sure no two are the same. She’ll go to a different place each day. She’ll need to visit the guild office regularly, but I’ll be there to watch her during those times.”

King Randolph nodded, seeming convinced. “Within your sight, you say. That sounds better than having her perform official duties or work at the orphanage.”

“Mm-hmm. And she’ll have Frank with her. That should make it harder for the assassin than if Almelia were alone.”

“You overestimate me, Roland.”

“Almelia still lacks experience killing people.” I glanced at Frank, and he let out a dry laugh.

The man had come from poverty and worked his way up to officer, all with a single spear. Before taking up the weapon, he'd done all manner of things in order to survive, or so I'd heard.

"Almelia is reckless and a fool who overestimates her own abilities. However, you're a veteran, so I know you'll command your soldiers well and keep her protected."

"I'll do my best not to betray that trust," Frank replied.

"Excuse me? Who did you just call a reckless fool?"

"What I meant is that you're unrivaled when it comes to surmounting a difficult situation," I corrected.

"A-all right, then. You could have phrased it that way from the start."

"Wow, it's all in the delivery," Frank muttered in a voice too low for Almelia to hear.

I had no idea how long the Welger Company and Barbatos Guerrera's people had considered Almelia a major obstacle to their schemes, but fortunately, they hadn't made a move yet. Yet their inaction seemed odd in its own way.

"I'd like to keep an eye on Almelia myself for a while, considering this is an emergency."

"You've never been this insistent about a matter like this before, Roland... All right, I'll allow it. You may keep my daughter under your surveillance." The king assented so readily that Almelia seemed dubious.

"Are you sure, Father?" she questioned. "What about my duties and work at the orphanage...?"

"You hardly do any of that as it is."

"Grrr..." Almelia went quiet, evidently unable to offer a rebuttal.

Almelia's most important job was to exist as a symbol of goodwill. As the hero who'd led the world to peace, she was the only person who could make the public feel secure.

"Also, Roland, torture proved fruitless against Barbatos. However, we did

uncover another letter in his estate. We couldn't manage to decipher it, though." King Randolph produced several sheets from a drawer in his desk. "Can you?"

I looked through the missive he'd handed me. No ordinary person would've been able to comprehend the writing.

"It's written in a modified version of an assassin cipher. It looks to be a report."

I was familiar with the handwriting. Amy probably hadn't considered that I, the only person who'd recognize her penmanship, would read these pages. Though the sender's name was absent, the letter was for Barbatos, so it had to be from Amy. It detailed her activities taking underground guild work...and kidnapping a princess. It ended with her stating she would continue seeking jobs at the underground guild while observing her target.

"It's from Amy," I said.

"I knew it."

"Wh-who is that...?" When Almelia saw King Randolph's face cloud over, she looked at me.

"She's the one who took me in and raised me to be the assassin I am now."

Frank shivered and grimaced. "You're not saying that your teacher is targeting Her Highness, are you?"

"I thought as much, and now this letter is proof. She must be."

Frank sighed and whispered, "I suppose it's time to write my will..." His shoulders sank.

"Roland's teacher..."

"That's how I know all her tricks," I said. "Don't worry, Almelia. Frank will protect you, even if it means risking his own life."

"You're killing me off already? Give me a break..."

Almelia looked more serious than before. Evidently, she understood we weren't dealing with an ordinary person. This was a powerful foe, and vigilance

was paramount.

Once we finished talking, I took Almelia and headed for Bardenhawk.

“Can we really travel there that easily?” she asked. It was a reasonable question.

“Just watch,” I answered, then I used a Gate, and we were teleported to Izaria.

Frank and his men would be traveling over on horseback, a journey that would take them several days. I would act as Almelia’s protector in the intervening time.

“That was instant... Wow.”

The princess looked around, and her eyes went wide when she realized her surroundings had completely changed. Together, we walked to the largest road in the city, which ran right by the Adventurers Guild.

“Is that one of the ones the demons used...?”

“Yes. I had the opportunity to learn it from someone. It’s a type of magic called Gate,” I explained.

“Oh? How useful.”

During our stroll I took a moment to update Almelia on what I’d been doing for work in Bardenhawk.

“You set up a guild here?” she asked.

“Yes. The queen requested it from King Randolph.”

“It looks like they’ve made a lot of progress rebuilding...”

The duchy had fallen during the war, and we, as the party of heroes, couldn’t stop its destruction. That likely still weighed on Almelia’s conscience.

“I doubt anyone holds it against you.”

She’d learn that soon enough. No one here was bitter over the past. More likely, they looked forward to tomorrow. They were optimistic people.

“So if I’m going to become an adventurer, that means I need to go through

the application process here, correct?”

“Yes, but there’s no rush. You’ll stay by my side until Frank arrives in a few days.”

“By your side... Ohhhh.” Almelia made a strange sound as she clasped her hands to her chest and blushed.

“This is a perfect chance to train,” I stated.

“Huh?”

“This is a perfect chance to train,” I reiterated.

“It’s not that I didn’t hear you the first time...”

“I want you to be able to beat Frank without your skills or magic by the time he arrives in Bardenhawk.”

“Whaaat?! But h-he’s so strong. W-well, I guess to you, he’s nothing much.”

“Where did you get that silly idea from? I wouldn’t stand a chance if I faced him one-on-one with a spear.”

“You can’t beat him, but you want me to?” Almelia looked wholly displeased.

“Correct. If I was only armed with a spear and faced him directly in a solo fight.”

In any real combat scenario, I’d never engage Frank in such a reckless manner. I didn’t battle like a chivalrous dueling knight. I’d employ assassination techniques, and it would do Almelia well to get used to those types of maneuvers. Her would-be assailant had taught them to me, after all.

“Well, if I fought against him directly and neither of us used magic... I guess I could win?” She didn’t sound very confident.

“We don’t have long, but let’s practice together tonight.”

“F-fine. But I’m not happy about it...”

“Based on how your gait and where you’re carrying your body, it looks like you’ve put on a few pounds.”

“I—I have not! S-so rude!”

“You’re not as sharp as you were during the war.”

“Th-that’s not true...”

Almelia turned away, unable to meet my eyes.

She was quick to develop an attitude, but I was accustomed to that.

It was only natural for her to go soft since the war was over; I supposed that was fine. However, a new enemy had appeared, and she had little choice but to prepare. She couldn’t remain idle. I had to sharpen her up.

Almelia slowed down while we were walking, so I turned to check on her, only to find her scowling while pinching her waist. She’d grown taller, so I didn’t understand why her chest remained unchanged. It was practically the same as when we first met.

We headed to a clearing that adventurers often used for practice. It was situated far from the busy streets and residential areas, so the only light source was the moon high in the sky. The only sounds were the soft chirrups of insects.

“We’re alone together at night... Why did it have to be for training?” Almelia grumbled, looking put out.

“First, try to follow my movements with your eyes.”

“N-no way! No can do! That’s impossible! Your movements? With my eyes? And at night?!”

“‘Impossible’ no longer exists in your vocabulary. You need to get used to being in the dark.”

“But...,” Almelia mumbled as she hung her head. “I-in that case, I want a reward!”

“...Fine. I suppose some motivation is important.”

“If I lay a hand on you...th—then...I want a date. A-a date, but, like, between a normal man and a normal girl. That’s what I want...”

The moonlight made it more obvious Almelia’s face had grown red.

“A *normal* man... Hmm. All right.”

That didn’t sound too difficult. I *was* a normal man.

“Wait, what’s with that expression on your face? Wh-whatever. I’m going to work really hard. I can do this. I can. This is it!” Almelia opened and closed her hands, clenching her fists several times to work herself up.

“But only if you lay a hand on me,” I reminded her.

“I—I know.”

The training went all night, continuing until I had to leave for work in the morning. It had been a while since I’d trained like this.

“I can’t...touch you... Should have...chosen something easier... You’re still on a whole different level...”

By dawn, Almelia, who was out of shape like I’d suspected, could no longer stand. I was right to have taken her under my care.

“According to your own standards, your opponent is more than you can currently handle. The training is only going to get more intensive.”

“No... No more...”

I lent Almelia a shoulder as she threatened to break into tears. For now, I decided to take her to the guild.

“Mr. Roland, you didn’t return to the castle. And now you’ve brought the princess with you?” Milia said, her tone wavering.

It would take a long time to explain why Almelia was here, which wasn’t exactly a heartwarming story, so I told everyone that Almelia was observing the branch.

“Yes, since we can easily go to and from here with the Gate.”

It was simple enough to make Almelia into an adventurer since the entire world knew how powerful she was. However, she wouldn’t take any quests until Frank arrived. Until then, I would be getting her ready.

People had begun to loiter in the reception hall to gawk at Almelia. When the staffers passed by her, they would freeze from nervousness. I felt bad for them and for causing extra hassle for Iris. There was nowhere else I could’ve taken the princess, but this would certainly interfere with work.

While considering what to do, I heard someone call out brightly, “There you are, Roland!”

Maylee, Roje, Rila in her cat form, and the pretty girl squad had arrived. Maylee dashed up to the counter and hopped up and down.

“Where were you? You didn’t come home all night.”

Roje sighed, seemingly wishing to say something to the effect of, “*You could have told someone that you weren’t coming home. Honestly...*”

“I left to pick up Felind’s princess. She’s going to stay here for a while.” I pointed behind me.

Maylee’s eyes glittered. “I-it’s the heroooo!”

Kids looked up to Almelia. Roje was less than impressed, however.

“Roje, do not allow your temper to show,” Rila warned, her voice at a whisper.

“I—I know, Lord Rileyla,” the elf replied softly.

Eelu and Su appeared awestruck, while Lyan and Sanz had a reaction similar to Maylee’s.

“Master Roland... You went all the way to the Felind Kingdom to bring the great hero here?”

I nodded. “Yes, she’ll be with us for a while to observe how the new guild operates.”

“I knew you were amazing, Master Roland, but I had no idea you had ties to Felind’s hero-princess,” Su remarked, which gave me an idea.

“Hey, Alme—I mean...Princess,” I called.

“What is it?”

“This is Lady Alias, the princess of Bardenhawk,” I said. “We call her Maylee.”

Almelia bent over a bit to meet Maylee’s eyes. “Hello, Lady Alias.”

“H-h-hello, great hero!” Maylee was bursting with excitement. Apparently, I didn’t need to introduce Almelia.

Despite hailing from different nations, both were princesses. The pair would surely form a bond over that.

“While I’m working, could you go with Maylee and the others...Princess?”

“Why not? I’d just impede your work here.”

Roje seemed doubly mortified by that proposal. “Lord Rileyla, are you fine with this?”

“I will allow it,” Rila replied. “She is a friend.”

“A friend?!” Roje eyed Almelia dubiously. The hero tilted her head to one side, confused.

“Hm? A cat that talks...and that voice. Wait, it’s my teacher, the black cat!”

“Mm-hmm. It is I, waif.”

“Why, you little—! You dare address Lord Rileyla by such a lowly title?!” Roje was quick to start a fight whenever it came to Rila.

“What’s wrong with you, elf? This doesn’t concern you... Are you trying to start something?” Almelia said.

“N-no!”

Evidently, the two women understood who was stronger than the other.

“Rila, are you friends with the great hero?”

“Mm-hmm. She’s even visited my home,” Rila replied.

“Wowwwwww!”

“Huh?” Now Almelia looked puzzled.

I’d never explained to her that the black cat she’d met on the Somaleel coast and Rila, who she’d met when the demon lord’s purse was snatched, were the same person. I did so now.

“My teacher and Rila are the same person... Th-that sounds complicated... So all that risqué stuff she told me about was from...?” Almelia’s eyes darted between Rila and me.

“Certain circumstances make it more likely for us to meet while I am in this

form. I'm glad of our reunion, Almelia."

"Yes. It's nice seeing you again, too."

Almelia took Rila's front paw and gave it a sort of handshake.

I winked at Rila, and she nodded to show she understood. As long as Almelia was with Roje, Rila, and the pretty girl squad, I wouldn't need to keep an eye on her. Then again, Almelia was much stronger than any of them, so I almost wondered who was protecting whom.

"I only know a little bit about adventurers, Lady Alias, so I don't know what you actually do. You'll need to teach me."

"I-I-I'll show you! Mmf!" Maylee made an excited sound.

"I believe you reached E rank today, Maylee," I commented.

"That's right! I want a quest where I can fight lotsa monsters!" Perhaps she was trying to show off in front of the hero.

"I'll give you a moderately difficult one, then."

With many others around to help, I didn't think Maylee would have any trouble even if she encountered monsters, but I still set her up with a comparatively safe herb-gathering quest.

"See you later!" Maylee waved her arms wildly as she left.

Once Almelia's group departed, the entire guild relaxed. Her hero title wasn't just for show. When people saw her, they stiffened up and worked hard to keep from making mistakes in front of her. With Almelia gone, I would get a lot more done, though.

Iris came by and handed me a familiar envelope. "For you, Roland."

I thanked her, and opened the missive. It was from Ben Amster, the former guild master of the Welger Company.

He'd written regarding our plan to deal with the current head of the company. We'd turned the investigation into a quest I had Dey and Ravi take. They were going to find out what kind of organization the Welger Company truly was, inside and out. If Ben thought his old enterprise was headed down

the wrong bath, even without Barbatos involved anymore, he was prepared to reclaim leadership.

According to him, he couldn't stand something he'd built from the ground up being used for nefarious ends.

"Master Roland, I'm baaack."

"I'm back, Roland!"

Dey and Ravi had come to check in.

"How did tailing go? Same as before?" I motioned for the two to sit across from me.

"I don't think there's much of a difference. They lost Barbatos, but they've been fundraising a lot and seem to be panicking."

Had Barbatos and the Welger Company gotten their way, both would have ended up controlling a country. And if one side triumphed, it would surely render great support for the other. Without its ally, the Welger Company was clearly starting to worry.

"Their work is a *looot* less fancy than before. And they've hired way more tough guys who *looove* blabbing. With all the information I got from Bale, buttering up these new sources has been pretty easy."

Clearly, the Welger Company still had no idea how to operate other than by poaching and smuggling, and it had recently abandoned all real commerce to focus on underground enterprise. Ben would definitely be ashamed.

"Good job," I told Dey and Ravi. "You can take a break today."

I handed over the reward I'd prepped for them.

"W-w-we've really earned all of this?!" Ravi exclaimed, incredulous.

They each got one million, a show of how serious the client was about this mission.

"Master Roland asks me to do difficult, specialized quests," Dey explained. "So the rewards are higher, too."

Ravi hugged Dey. "I'm going to partner with you forever!"

“Oh my, oh my.” Dey laughed.

Having Ravi’s defensive skill probably helped Dey feel safer during the daytime. One was the arms, and the other the shield. They made a good team.

I wrote a reply to Ben’s letter, explaining everything Dey and Ravi had told me.

In the former count’s missive, he’d also written:

If the guild is unsalvageable, then I would like to submit an assassination quest to the underground guild.

It seemed it would soon be time for me to visit that seedy place again.

I needed to nip the issue plaguing Bardenhawk in the bud before it could spread like a cancer.

◆ Moyes ◆

When I headed into a back room, I found a man hanging his head. He was wearing a plain cloak.

“Hey, Slade. Been a while since you showed your face around here.”

“Yeah. I’ve been busy.”

“Very busy, I’m sure,” I muttered to myself. “Find any quests that caught your eye?”

“This one.”

He showed me a sheet we hadn’t put up more than ten minutes ago.

“The assassination of the Welger Company’s leader.”

Ben Amster was the client. The former count had withdrawn his bounty on the man who’d ruined the underground arena. I never learned whether he’d changed his mind or found satisfaction and saw fit to end the quest.

I’d warned Slade not to get involved, but I hadn’t heard what transpired after. That job had been the only one he’d showed interest in. All the other quests he’d completed looked like he was just going through the motions.

He'd told me one of his friends had met an unfortunate end. Smelled like a lie to me. Given how Slade conducted himself, I doubted he even had friends. The guy struck me more as the type to fight alone and die that way, too.

"Killing the head of the Welger Company... A guild master, eh."

The man's name was Pablo Weber. Forty-three years old. The one who put in the request used to be close to the target, so there was plenty of information to be had.

I hadn't learned the motive behind it, but nothing good came from prying, so I generally didn't.

"I heard you did well during your previous assassination... The one with Bescoda. Should be fine if you handle this one."

"I see."

"But...there's not much of a reward. You sure about this?"

This was the man who'd practically threatened me over the Bescoda assassination payment being too low.

Honestly, Slade terrified me back then. Didn't know many who oozed murder just because you pissed them off. I couldn't help but wonder what kinda life Slade had lived to be capable of something like that.

Since he was a special case, I'd increased the reward, but that was a onetime exception. And I'd only allowed it because Slade came recommended by Victor.

It had even almost sounded like he knew the guild was taking a giant cut. Which meant...the guy was far from a rookie. Slade was the real deal, a pro who knew everything about the underground biz.

"Yes, I wouldn't mind a smaller reward," he said.

What the...? He was being awfully passive this time.

"I have a personal grudge against this man," he added.

"Huh."

Sounded like bullshit. If Slade really had a grudge, he wouldn't have admitted to it with such indifference. Plus, it was clear he wasn't the crazy berserker type

who didn't care about the money as long as he got to kill.

Slade's eyes were the most frightening pair I'd ever seen. No instinct in them, just logic... The eyes of a killer who'd take someone apart like a hunk of meat.

What was he scheming at this time?

"..." With such a low payout, no one else was going to take this assassination job. "You get things done. Take the quest."

"Thank you."

What had led Slade here? I was a little curious, but looking into that kind of stuff was forbidden.

Personally, I didn't care, considering the man's results. If he was fine doing a lousy gig at the agreed-upon amount, I was happy and so was the client. Joy all around.

Fine enough for me. All perfectly acceptable.

"I'm counting on you," I said while watching Slade leave the room.

He turned around and gave me a look with those shrewd eyes in response. There was no doubt he'd succeed.

Slade made all the other people who stopped by the underground guild seem harmless by comparison. All of them were here because they figured if they were going to do something bad, they might as well get some money for it, too.

That's what the underground guild was—a gathering of those rough types.

It was easy for me to see how the Welger Company's leader, Pablo, became the target of an assassination quest.

He'd been involved in kidnapping, illegal poaching, smuggling drugs, illicit trading... Really, that was how things had always been at the Welger Company. Lately, however, it seemed like he'd grown kinda panicked.

Pablo had previously put in quests at the underground guild, so we'd sent men to scope out his business.

The company acted like a proper enterprise on the surface, but in truth, it was a genuine criminal syndicate. Merchants who worked there must have caught

wind of that because they'd been leaving in droves recently. With the rise of the Adventurers Guild in Bardenhawk, the dealers were able to put in requests for things they couldn't handle themselves.

I always kinda suspected Pablo would end up on someone's hit list. It happened a whole lot faster than I'd thought, though.

Three days had passed since Slade took the quest.

Pablo Weber's corpse was discovered in his own home.

We'd also dispatched twenty of our own to the scene after Pablo submitted his own guarding quest. Thankfully, all of them had survived. Each was well suited to protection work, yet none had noticed the murder occur. It had to be Slade... He was just built differently from the rest.

I was prepping a reward when someone I hadn't seen in a while stopped by. The beautiful woman's black hair flowed in loose waves. Dull golden eyes, a thin nose, and as tall as a man—a lovely figure all around.

She was always one to watch out for.

I took a swig from the flask I kept on hand.

"Hey, Moyes, how've you been?"

"Still kicking. Any quest caught your eye?" I asked.

"The underground guild doesn't *just* exist for quests, y'know."

"You accept quests here for a reward," I replied. "That's what this place is for."

Her name was Maria, although that was likely a fake identity. Few used their real ones here.

"Oh, don't be like that," she said.

Oh, right. Speaking of murder... Maria was just as capable as *that* guy. I'd known her since before the war, however.

"So I have a very interesting job right now. But it's been just a *teensy bit* difficult," Maria remarked.

"Must be a nasty one to give you trouble."

“Right? I was hoping you could provide a little intel for me.”

Maria grinned. She had a rough way of conducting herself and never flaunted her femininity, but she smiled at times like these. She was an amazing woman. But she was also a bad woman—one who knew how to use her charms.

“What information are you looking for?”

“So you know how the princess of Felind has come to Bardenhawk? Well, she’s with someone pretty dangerous...and I can’t get anywhere near her.”

“Even you can’t approach this person? That’s unusual.”

“Pushing my luck with this guy will cause trouble.”

“That bad? What’s he look like? Tell me about this guy.”

“Honestly, I can’t risk getting near enough to find out.” Maria looked happy despite saying what she was saying. “And it’s driving me crazy a guy like that is wandering around. I want info on him.”

“You haven’t given me enough to go on.”

“You’re right, of course,” Maria said with a sigh. Seemed she’d asked me as a last resort. “That’s what makes this job so interesting, though.”

That was the dangerous thing about Maria. She was the exact opposite of Slade. The sort of woman born for fighting...like a teen girl who loved murder.

“Oh, right,” she said, as though remembering something. “What happened to that wanted poster?”

“Which one?” I asked.

“The one for the underground arena. It had a good picture to go with it.”

“It was withdrawn... Did you draw the sketch?”

“Oh, really? We forced him to put in the request, so I guess that’s not surprising.”

I had no idea what Maria was talking about, but it seemed she knew something about that bounty.

When I found a copy, Maria exclaimed, “Yes, that’s the one!” She stared at

the poster like an eager kid. “I wonder where he is.”

Maria stroked the poorly drawn image lovingly. Her childish expression disappeared, suddenly replaced with that of a mother and also a woman thinking of a recent lover.

“...Who knows? It’s too late to claim the reward if you kill him now, though.”

“I know... Oh.”

“What?”

“I remembered another one of his fake names. However, he doesn’t use it nearly as much as the others written on the bounty.”

“Does it really matter when the quest’s already been with—?”

“Slade.”

My heart leaped out of my chest.



This had nothing to do with me, yet I had goose bumps. All the dots connected abruptly.

“Well, she’s with someone pretty dangerous.”

It all fell into place.

“That’s right. It’s Slade. Slade.” Maria repeated the name as though she’d rediscovered one of her old, coveted playthings.

“Know anything about him?”

8

An Impending Reunion, Part II

Almelia's arrival in Bardenhawk ushered in busier times.

I'd been working as a guild employee during the day and at the underground guild at night. However, I'd recently completed a quest at the latter, so I didn't need to visit again for a while. I'd taken on assassination work for a fee that was much too small, but that was fine since it was probably the last job like that I'd do.

As for the Welger Company, Ben Amster would be reclaiming his place as head of the organization to clean up after the previous disastrous leadership. The company was well on its way to becoming the upstanding business it had once been.

Hopefully, that meant the end of the idiotic plan to take over Bardenhawk.

"Looks like I'll be on guard duty for Her Highness and the little princess for a while," Frank, who'd arrived a few days ago, groused to me while I worked.

Today, I planned to give the "little princess" Maylee a dog-walking quest and another where she'd have to watch over some younger children. Almelia, now an adventurer herself, was going to accompany her.

Since Maylee and Almelia's guard contingents made up a rather large group of nearly twenty people, they drew eyes whenever they walked through the town.

"Stop complaining and get ready to protect Almelia," I told him.

"You really think she'll get attacked?"

The Shadows I'd sent off in secret were keeping an eye out. I occasionally looked through their eyes, but no evidence of an assailant turned up.

However...

“Let’s just say that if the person we’re up against was the type to signal an attack, I wouldn’t be so vigilant. I wouldn’t have bothered warning King Randolph, either.”

“I suppose you have a point. But will she really attack the little princess?”

“No. I’m certain of that.”

“How?”

“I think it’s likely that the assassin’s only job is to kill Almelia. She...doesn’t enjoy collateral damage. If someone gets in the way, though, she won’t hesitate.”

Amy usually just killed the target and returned home unscathed. She taught me that was what made for beautiful assassination work.

“There are some who would resort to anything to get the job done, who don’t care about appearances, but that’s the same as announcing themselves as incompetent. She works as an assassin, not a murderer.”

“I see. So she’s proud of her work.”

Frank and I made small talk while I arranged quests for Almelia and Maylee, who’d been waiting their turn.

“I want a quest where I can slay monsters...”

“Yeah, especially since I’m with her.”

The two princesses looked quite displeased.

“I thought this was a good opportunity for you to learn what the people of the town worry about day to day... I suppose you’re much more interested in monsters than the daily lives of the common people.”

When I put it that way, the two girls set their mouths into thin lines and reluctantly accepted the quests.

I saw the pair and the guards off, then deployed a Shadow I’d summoned discreetly to tail them.

With any luck, today would be uneventful.

Maylee and Almelia, as well as their guards, returned in the evening without

any issues. Evidently, Amy was either keeping vigilant or still devising a plan.

Almelia took on adventurer work and went somewhere different every day, at my instruction, which made planning to assassinate her extremely difficult.

Since I was deciding where the princesses went and what they'd do, there was no chance Amy could predict their movements.

"What would I do next if I had taken on this job...?" I said to myself.

Maylee and Almelia were still in the guild office's lobby, telling Frank about some feast to be held in the castle this evening or the like.

Leyte had insisted that a Felind princess couldn't stay at a simple inn and had offered to provide a guest room at the castle, but I'd made sure Almelia declined. She needed to sleep in a different place each night. Almelia had served in the army, so she was used to resting just about anywhere so long as it wasn't storming.

"Roland, when does your work end?"

"Soon," I answered.

"Could we keep training short for today? I've been invited to the castle," Almelia said.

"All right," I replied.

Her training was going well. Almelia had grown more capable of following my movements with her eyes. She still couldn't touch me, but her attempts were getting more accurate.

Of course, she still got confused when I used skill, but she was doing well nonetheless.

Almelia was a quick study and lived up to her title as the hero.

Maylee and the others returned to the castle ahead of us as Almelia and Rila waited in the lobby for me to finish my work.

"So, Rila, what's Roland like at home?"

"Oh? Has your curiosity gotten the best of you?" Rila replied.

"N-no... What's so wrong about asking?" Almelia turned her head away from

Rila, who was sitting on the hero-princess's lap.

"What a sweet girl you are." Rila snickered quietly.

I watched the odd conversation happening between two who had supposedly been mortal enemies at one point. Iris thanked everyone for our work today, and we finished up.

"Almelia, we're heading out," I called.

"Okay."

Together, we left the guild and made for the usual clearing. That was when Rila commented, "So this is how you trained the princess to become a hero. I see..."

"I was tasked with looking after her, and the first step was making sure she had the knowledge to survive a fight," I explained.

Almelia and I worked on evasion and defense first today. Then we moved to stamina and survival knowledge. Finally, I exercised her eye for judgment and methods of prioritization.

"I think I have the basics down, at least," Almelia said.

"Your arrogance will eventually get you killed," I cautioned.

"Ugh... I feel like you've said that to me before..."

"Heh-heh-heh," Rila snickered. "He's entirely correct."

"Not you, too, Rila..."

Frank's men were guarding the vicinity. Frank himself, however, was watching nearby, grinning at the sight.

After growing a bit lax after the war, Felind's princess was finally regaining her discipline. She blocked my attacks today, and we continued evasion drills. Almelia tried to catch me as I approached her, and there were a few times when she got very close.

"...I think we can wrap it up soon," I stated, casting a look at Frank, who seemed rather sleepy.

"Hm? What is it?" he replied.

“Frank, could you spar with Almelia?” I asked.

“Huh? Me?”

“Without any skills.”

“All right, I suppose...”

The guardsman and the princess took their places in the middle of the field.

“Hmm. So his position as a captain of the imperial knights is for more than just show,” Rila stated.

“You can tell, huh?”

“On the other hand, Almelia’s comportment suggests she’s not very powerful...”

At some point, Rila had decided that had she fought Almelia, she would have won. Almelia readied her sword and Frank his spear. A hush fell over the two, and the air tensed.

“Hah!” Frank lunged, taking the first strike. The tip of his gray spear shot for the princess, yet she dodged it smoothly.

“Good, good,” Rila said. “An admirable opening maneuver... And Almelia made certain not to create an opening as she evaded.”

Frank looked quite surprised. It seemed he hadn’t expected Almelia to dodge so expertly. The princess had a superior eye for combat than before she began her recent training. She carried herself better, too.

Even I believed that.

“So that exercise of her trying to catch and attack you while avoiding being flicked on the forehead...”

“Going up against an assassin means the conventional strength she’s relied on in the past won’t be of much use. I’ve taught Almelia that she must rely on her perception and be mindful of the patterns an assassin might use to approach her rather than her mere physical might.”

Our training had undoubtedly helped Almelia feel like Frank’s spear was moving slower than it was.

“She avoided the blow with the bare minimum of movement, creating the perfect opportunity for a counterattack,” Rila noted.

“Almelia prided herself in being the most powerful person in the world when dealing with large-scale battles, but she was never any good with little details like this,” I answered.

“I am impressed she’s grown so much in a mere week.”

“It’s all the result of her own talents and hard work.”

“What are you saying? You are her teacher, and she is your pupil.”

Teacher and pupil, eh?

“Roland! What did you teach Her Highness?! I haven’t been able to hit her at all!”

“Sir, you can strike with everything you have,” Almelia said.

“Damn it! I already am!”

The princess was devoting herself entirely to evasive and defensive maneuvers. She would need to survive three minutes if attacked by an assassin. I’d stressed that point to Almelia.

Once Frank began to slow, Almelia struck him in the stomach with her sheath.

“Guhf!”

“I won! Without even using my skill!”

Frank collapsed onto his back.

“You no longer resort to brute force... You’re actually capable of shrewd tactics...”

“Ha-ha-ha. I’ve really improved! Tell me who I am! Come on, say it.”

“Damn it. Now you’re getting on my nerves... You’re the hero, all right,” Frank conceded.

“A single victory has made her a braggart, it seems,” Rila commented.

“It’s a bad habit of hers,” I replied.

A common error when facing an assassin was focusing too much on offense.

However, if you abandoned attacking and concentrated on your defense, you bought yourself enough time for help to arrive or to look for an opening yourself. We only needed Almelia to survive to win.

“ ... ”

I'd planned my tactics around making sure we could defeat Amy, no matter what methods we needed to use.

Rila looked up at me, worry plain on her face. “I wish we were in bed now and I had you clasped in my arms... If that is what you desire, then I wouldn't be unwilling.”

That was a funny way of putting it when she was the one asking me.

“Oh, we're going to be late for dinner! How long are you going to lie there, Frank? Hurry up!”

“All right, enough. Don't rush me. I'm an old man.” Frank groaned as he stood, then joined Rila and me in following Almelia, who was already on her way.

Since Almelia had been invited to dinner, I'd also requested to join. Leyte was kind enough to allow the guards to come as well, so the meal was lively.

At my feet, Rila lapped at some wine.

Maylee made a racket as Leyte chided her. Almelia displayed an elegance she kept reserved for these types of events, and Frank was as polite as he could be.

“Rila, what would you do?” I asked.

“...Me?”

I'd been mulling over something during the meal and decided to ask for some thoughts.

“I believe you said that she would not harm Maylee or anyone else so long as they do not interfere with her work,” Rila said.

“Yeah. That's right.”

“To put it another way, those who impede her will know no mercy. In which case, I would personally focus on isolation.”

“You mean the target?”

“No, *you*—the only threat she presently perceives. You are preventing the target from ever being alone.”

Me?

The idea had occurred to me, of course. It was plausible, but did Amy genuinely view me as a threat?

“Do not allow strange ideas into your head,” Rila warned.

“Strange ideas?”

“...” Rila stared at me without uttering a single word before returning to her drink.

Once she was done, she trotted under the table to Roje’s feet and hopped into the elf’s lap. Roje chatted with Rila as though babying a real cat.

The meal continued and concluded leisurely, and I left Shadows to watch Almelia while I departed from the castle. There was a chance I could gather more information if I used the underground guild.



I tried looking for Moyes at the underground guild, but he wasn’t around.

“Haven’t seen him lately,” an ugly man who seemed to be a coworker explained when I asked.

Information traded hands here often, meaning employees could easily come into danger. An absent staffer was probably a common occurrence.

“If you want to see him...” The man told me where Moyes lived.

“Are you allowed to reveal that?” I questioned.

“He said to tell you if you ever came lookin’ for him.”

I thanked the man and went on my way.

“...”

If Amy intended to target me while I was alone as Rila had suggested, this was the perfect time. I hadn't acted alone much until now. I thought I'd worked hard not to appear as a threat or an obstruction, though...

Moyes had told his coworkers to tell me where he lived, then disappeared. It was almost like he'd planned this absence, even going so far as to leave a way for me to reach him.

There was a high likelihood that this was a trap to lure me out.

"So she's determined that I'm preventing her target from ever being alone—"

She'd concluded that Slade—Roland—stood in the way of her reaching Almelia.

I couldn't tell how well connected she was with Bardenhawk's criminal element, but it seemed possible she employed the same underground guild information network I did.

That meant that Moyes was her source...

It seemed he'd sold me out. That sort of thing happened fairly regularly. I shrugged slightly, feeling something I hadn't in a while.

If I were focused on defense, I would return to Almelia and cower, fearfully waiting for the assailant.

However, it was obvious that I needed to confront Amy at some point. Doing so when she was after me, not the princess, was best.

I'd turn the tables and bring her down.

With the castle at my back, I headed off to a house on the city's outskirts.

◆ Almelia ◆

Something felt off.

It was right before my bath. I'd been heading off to the changing room with Lady Alias and some of the guards.

"...Sir, where's Roland?" I asked Frank.

“Probably in his room. You want Roland to guard you even while you’re in the bath?”

“N-no!”

Frank laughed, but then had one of his men search for Roland.

“They’re gone.”

“What are?”

“Those little guys Roland summons,” I replied.

“Ah, those things. What are they called again? Shadows, right? He probably thinks we’re safe in the castle.”

I wondered if that was true.

Just like Roland had told me, I slept somewhere different every night. Each time, one of Roland’s Shadows was present.

Did he really think it was safe here? During the war, he’d always reiterated that we should never let our guard down.

“Would Roland do that...?”

And then there was that odd feeling earlier. No one had believed me, but Roland had explained that wild animals had a sixth sense, and that I ought to value that intuition. I pushed my change of clothes on my lady-in-waiting and confirmed I was wearing my sword before running down the hall.

“Your Highness! Where are you going?” I heard Frank call after me.

“I’m sorry, I need to do this!”

I ignored the guards chasing me as I hurried beyond the castle’s limits.

Roland...

Maybe he was in a situation where he couldn’t maintain his Shadows.

You always told me off.

You always came to my rescue.

You always protected me.

“Just this once, I can...”

I was wearing little, and I outpaced Frank and the other guards, who were fully armored. I left them behind, running through the quiet town while gasping for breath and searching for signs of battle.

I felt confident something was going on. Then a shadow suddenly appeared in front of me, and I stopped.

“Where are you going, Almelia?”

“Roland, I was looking for you...”

I inhaled slowly to steady my breath.

The clouds obscuring the moon parted, illuminating the area.

“Go back to the castle. I’ll handle the assassin.”

“...” I took a step back.

“I figured out where she is. I’ll go stop her. You don’t have anything to worry about.”

“...”

I took another step away and crouched slightly. The pressure from each word made my knees weak. I felt cold sweat running down my back.

“Listen to me; go straight back to the castle.”

I had to trust what he’d told me.

The moment Roland turned, he disappeared as though melting into the dark.

It’s coming!

I leaped forward without hesitation and heard the sharp sound of the air behind me being torn.

I spun to find Roland with his head cocked in curiosity.

“Huh... That’s odd... How did you figure it out?”

“Roland never spoke in absolutes about our opponent. He knew they were too much of a threat to be that cocky.”

I was glad I recalled what he said after I noticed the Shadows were missing.

“Follow your sixth sense.”

I’d trusted his words about relying on that intuition. I’d evaded this attack because it was the same kind he’d performed during training.

“Remember this. The moment anyone turns their back, they’re prone to letting their guard down.”

This Roland was tossing a dagger into the air, playing with it. The real one would never do that. Closer inspection revealed there was more that was off about him, including a slightly different expression. This was an impostor.

“Ahh, oh well. I thought this might be easy, but it looks like I was mistaken.”

This Roland grinned as shadows coiled around him as he changed form. A golden-eyed woman with black hair in loose waves took shape. She was pretty enough to rival Rila.

“I was having such a fun time thinking about what to do with you that I overdid it. And then you strengthened your guard. It certainly made things more difficult...but I enjoy a fair challenge. It’s a bad habit, but I wanted to tease you, to find a beautiful way to assassinate you.”

How many seconds had passed since we’d started facing each other?

“...I’ve been watching you for two months. Apparently, you’ve gotten stronger. I suppose that’s what all that practice was for. Nice, very nice.”

Sadism shone in her smile. I felt goose bumps form on my skin.

“I’m planning on having fun with you.”

I had to survive three minutes?

There was no way.

I finally understood why Roland had insisted on training at night. I barely sidestepped the assassin’s strike as she sped toward me.

“Ngh.”

Strong flashes of steel cleaved through the night. All of Roland’s exercises had been to prepare me for this.

“Hmm.”

She had the look of a cat toying with a wounded mouse.

Right as I started to feel confident...

...she launched her foot up.

I was too slow to react, and her foot met the side of my head, sending me flying into a house.

My vision blurred as the impact sent a shudder through my bones, but I still managed to stand.

“...”

Roland hadn't told me to run. When I'd asked why, he hadn't responded.

Now I realized it was because I was up against someone who would never give me a chance to flee. He should have told me.

I invoked one of my skills, Returner.

The pain and dizziness disappeared immediately.

“How interesting. You have a skill that restores you to before the start of the fight. That's a winner, a jackpot of a special skill...but that can't be all you've got, right? That alone doesn't seem worthy of the hero. And in that case...”

She understands how my skill works? Already? That was way too quick...

I hadn't used a skill while training with Roland, but if things continued like this, perhaps I'd survive the three minutes.

Returner allowed me to restore myself to my earlier condition. As long as I wasn't knocked unconscious or killed in a single blow, I could recover to a state before the battle began.

“I see. So as long as none of my blows are fatal, I can't defeat you.”

“You shouldn't underestimate me.”

I felt something run through my body. But what?

“Oh, come on. That's just plain unfair. You have three skills? Any normal person would only have one. And each is powerful, too, I see.”

This assassin must have had Appraisal or Skill Detection. Or perhaps she'd used some kind of magic that carried a similar effect.

"Y-you seem to have multiple skills yourself," I countered.

Rather than answer, the woman continued as though speaking to herself. "You really are a special thing, aren't you, girl. Offense, defense, and restoration... Each is a winner on its own... You can handle just about anything."



Long ago, I'd convinced myself that I could save the world alone, that possessing incredible skills set me apart. Plus, my naturally high mana capacity led me to believe I'd become an unstoppable force if I practiced sword magic, a style only a few in the world could employ effectively.

I was special.

Then a man, supposedly charged with my care, appeared from nowhere. He shattered my confidence, and asked if that was all I was capable of.

I was supposed to be special, yet he'd spoken of me like some ordinary village child.

"I'll make you into someone who can save the world."

I'd thought I could do it alone, but looking back, I likely would have failed.

"He called my three skills the Trinity. They're not meant for me to handle everything alone. Don't make my existence sound so lonely."

If she knew how Returner worked, then I'd try my defensive skill next.

"Magic Barrier." This would take the remaining mana proportional to...

"Huh...?"

It wasn't working.

"Oh, now that one's useful. Oh, but it's proportional to your mana."

A rainbow-colored, glowing barrier appeared before the woman.

How was she using my ability?

"You need to be adaptable. Cool and collected. You can't let yourself get shaken up, great hero."

I glared at the woman as she adopted an annoying tone that mimicked Roland's.

She hurled a knife at me, so I turned my head to dodge.

Without any weapons, this assassin couldn't strike me down in a single attack or knock me unconscious.

Then I heard the icy sound of steel and hurriedly turned to one side. At some

point, the assassin had closed in and drawn the sword at my hip.

When?

I hadn't seen her move.

She pointed the tip at me and charged, ready to run me through.

"Ah!"

I couldn't use Returner yet. If this attack connected, I would likely die.

With no other option, I activated my third skill, the one that made me the hero.

Indignation.

Missing with this skill meant death, but some chance of survival was better than none. I gritted my teeth and prayed I wouldn't faint.

An erratic surge of lightning sped for my foe.

"Guh... Ahhhhhh?!"

A terrific electrical discharge filled the air around us, illuminating everything in flickering blue.

"Tsk."

The woman was forced back. My whole body spasmed from using skill, but I'd made it. I was still conscious.

Returner.

"I won't let you do that again."

She pushed in again, trying to approach me.

I had her.

This was it!

"Indignation."

I let off another thunderbolt. There came a roar, and azure light filled my vision. Then I restored myself with Returner again.

"...You ran out of luck as soon as your attacks got hasty," I stated.

“You’re so quick to strike. It makes you seem immature.”

The voice came from behind, where I was defenseless. Before me, there was only empty space.

She was faster to attack than I was to dodge or parry.

When she kicked me, when she took my sword, and now, too.

I trained so hard, but I still lost sight of her even as she stood directly in front of me.

Just as it seemed hopeless, a figure silently appeared behind the assassin.

So this is why he didn’t train me to run, I realized.

Three minutes. That was how long it took for him to get here and find an opening. My foe had found a moment when I was defenseless, and that was precisely what we were aiming for. The only time she faltered was when she thought the kill was guaranteed.

That’s right.

He never attacked people head-on.

The Greatest Skill in the World

I attacked her by surprise.

I pierced her heart from behind with a knife I'd bought at a shop right at closing time.

I killed her.

At least, it seemed that way at first. A half-transparent barrier enveloped her from all sides, though. The knife stopped a fraction of a centimeter from its mark.

This is Ravi's...

"Dispell."

The barrier broke, but she'd already retreated several yards.

"..."

I'd let a once-in-a-lifetime chance escape. It ate away at me.

"Roland."

Still, Almelia looked relieved.

As though the tension in her had snapped like a thread, she collapsed to her knees. I supported her, and we both moved back.

"You did a great job," I praised.

I stroked her head as she lay unconscious.

I'd been watching Almelia fight, waiting for the chance to end things in a single blow...but it hadn't worked.

"You really are Slade."

"...It's been a while, Amy."

“Did you go all the way to Moyes’s house?”

“No,” I said.

“Bad boy,” she replied. A hint of a suggestive smile crossed her face. Amy was still as beautiful as I’d remembered. “So you pretended to fall for my trap, but you were actually watching the hero this whole time? And you were waiting for a moment to kill me.”

“Exactly,” I answered.

After realizing it was a ploy, I should’ve gone back to protect Almelia. But if I did, she’d be running from Amy for the rest of her life. I’d been worried about how well she’d do against Amy, but we’d trained enough for her to keep pace without using her skills.

“So you’re the one who taught Ravi—Ravishia—how to use her skill.”

“Who was that again?”

“The girl whose ability you used to block my attack.”

“Oh, the Barbatos mage.”

It seemed she’d finally remembered.

“She was a good girl, very diligent.”

“You taught me about my power, as well.”

“I’d do that much for anyone, Roland. You’re not that special.”

Right, she would. That was how she operated...

“It looks like your skill was stolen once.”

A fortune-teller had told me that.

Amy likely borrowed skills for a short period of time, losing and returning them to their owners after a while...

“I saw you activate my skill many times. How did you like using Unobtrusive?”

“It’s a loser skill—a big old loser.”

She’d said the same thing the last time, back when she probably copied my skill.

On my third mission, she'd used a recovery ability of some sort, leading me to believe that was her skill. I'd been wrong, however.

"I guess that's what it'd look like from the perspective of someone with a skill like Duplicate," I remarked.

I'd heard of the skill in passing, but this was my first time seeing it brought to bear. I couldn't believe someone I knew had it.

"It's the greatest skill in the world."

"So then...when you adopted me from the orphanage..."

"Exactly. I kept you until your skill manifested and used Skill Detection on you. If a skill seems useful, I copy it. If not, then it's good-bye."

"...You keep calling mine a loser skill, but it seems like you've really taken a liking to it."

"The usage makes a big difference."

Of course.

Seeing Amy again after so long brought a scowl onto my face, while nostalgic memories surfaced in my mind.

The house in the mountains. How she had sent me flying, kicked me, thrown me, knocked me out during training. Many, many times. Through the springs, summers, falls, and winters.

Amy was a gigantic wall... Even now, she seemed to loom larger than me.

She was my origin, the one who'd made me.

Victory was mine so long as Almelia survived...but I couldn't let Amy escape.

"And now you're a guild worker... Why? The two of us are supposed to live in shadow, lurking beneath the world forever. We don't belong anywhere."

"..."

"Roland... Don't disappoint me."

Amy made a move, and I took a step forward.

I activated Unobtrusive, using everything at my disposal to kill her.

“I know what you’re planning!” She invoked some other skill.

When Amy pretended to approach me from behind and instead closed in from the front, she appeared to take joy in my surprise.

I collided with something. I wasn’t close enough to reach Amy with a dagger, much less my hands. It was heavy as a mountain and large, too.

A rainbow-colored ripple expanded out from whatever blocked me. This was Victor’s Invincible!

Amy must have killed him.

“How’s that? The ultimate automatic defense.”

It seemed she wasn’t aware I’d broken through it once.

I activated Unobtrusive.

I dashed in front of her, then behind, and to her right and left, invoking my skill in quick succession.

My moves were instant so that she’d lose sight of me. Tracking me wasn’t easy. That’s probably why she called upon an automatic defense ability in the first place.

I needed to kill myself, my feelings toward Amy—everything. I had to be a blade, inorganic.

I willed everything to disappear.

I attacked from the left. Invincible didn’t react. The blade was going to connect!

From the corner of my eye, I saw Amy panicking slightly.

“Tch!”

A quick response, as always. She kicked my hand gripping the knife.

I didn’t mean to, but the force of the blow knocked it from my grip. The gray blade glinted in the moonlight.

She knew what I’d attacked with, and as for her... Well, there was no point in trying to guess what weapon she carried.

Fortunately, I'd picked up the knife she'd thrown at Almelia. I brought it out from behind my back, swiping up, but only managed to graze Amy's bangs.

"Roland, you used to dazzle more, but your flame has grown dim. When I left you, you would have ended things with that strike. You've become weaker."

She had to be right.

I invoked Unobtrusive again, and Amy vanished at the same time.

I couldn't help but click my tongue, never realizing how annoying my skill was until witnessing it for myself.

I resented it, despite it being my skill.

A *snap* sounded from far off. Amy had her palm raised at me. Sparks were gathering before her hand.

That's...

"Indignation."

She was planning on unleashing it in my direction.

With an explosive sound, the strongest skill—the hero's skill—lanced forward.

I leaped onto a roof. Had I not seen the skill many times before, I might have taken a direct hit.

At the same time, I felt something odd I hadn't noticed in the past.

"...Amy, you think abandoning weaknesses makes you stronger. And I agree when it comes to training an assassin."

"Oh, do you feel grateful now? After all this time?"

"But I don't need the kind of strength you put your faith in. Not anymore."

In the old days, there was no home for me. There was only a building in the mountains I retreated to for a brief reprieve. I had targets and rewards, the smells of blood and iron, and warmth from sleeping back-to-back.

"If you feel that the normalcy I seek, that I threw my life as an assassin away for, is weakness... Then I guess I'm trying to become weak. However, it's brought about a strength that your value system doesn't appreciate."

My blade would never reach her unless I pulled this off perfectly.

Fighting her was mentally and physically exhausting, however.

The next strike...

...would be the last.

“Listen, when you get home, you make sure to report right to your client. Otherwise, there’s no point.”

“Why?”

“Because that’s what it means to work as an assassin.”

Amy had taught me that when I was young.

I’d thought over how to take her by surprise many times. I’d failed in the end, but there were other possibilities.

The air was tense as I waited for my opportunity.

I still wasn’t accustomed to fighting someone straight on, especially against a strong foe. And the same likely applied to her, as well. When I got too close to her and felt the pressure coming from her, I could hardly breathe. The closer I stepped, the more overwhelmed I felt.

She tried to unleash another Indignation. She probably didn’t expect the first one to hit me, but it was a little too strong to call a half-hearted attack.

I dodged the bolts swiftly and ducked behind a house. Amy ran around the opposite side toward the same spot, as though in sync.

There was a gap. A split-second gap. Because it was the greatest skill in the world.

Similarly, there was also a gap between the next-nearest buildings.

I readied myself and activated Unobtrusive.

We both seemed to have sensed this would be the decisive moment.

Amy invoked a skill that hardened her body. I was familiar with that one.

Once she saw me, I simply used my ability over and over.

Amy was the one who said it best.

“Don’t become something else. Just dive deeper.”

But had she taken her own advice?

She’d employed a handful of convenient skills already. However, she surely knew that I’d recognize them. This time, she would definitely try something I wasn’t familiar with.

And in that momentary gap, as she chose the best power to call upon...

...I dove deeper.

Deeper into my one and only ability—my worthless skill.

This was all I’d ever had.

It was the only skill I could rely on.

I couldn’t change or abandon it, leaving me no option but to live with it.

I’d continued to hone a skill that no one else would have been proud of.

This skill was me. It was all I had.

Amy triggered another ability I wasn’t familiar with.

At the same time, I called upon my own loser skill.

She’d lost track of me, if only just.

“This is an absolute must, okay. You never yell as you attack.”

“Hraaaaah!”

“Next, you never attack someone from the front without a feint.”

I was attacking her straight on. It had to reach!

Fwoom! Something slipped through the air from my blind spot, and my right arm, the one clutching the knife, came away.

A curved blade of some kind had cleaved through the limb at the shoulder. That must have been her skill.

Oddly, there was no pain. Likely because I was so amped up.

Well, soon it wouldn’t matter whether it hurt.

“Finally, you need to live so that when you get home, you can report right to

your client immediately. Trading blows means you've got a bad plan."

In the best case, we would both land a blow. But it was unlikely to go that well.

Winning didn't necessarily mean defeating Amy.

Even if I couldn't inflict a mortal wound, a lasting injury that hampered her enough for Almelia to defeat her was sufficient.

My survival was irrelevant, so I staked my life on this.

Protecting Almelia was my win condition.

"What's an arm!" I said.

"Rolaaand!"

I lost my balance without one of my limbs, staggering. However, that turned out to be a blessing.

Amy's sword cut through the air. I hadn't meant to dodge; I'd intended on stabbing at her.

My lack of an arm made me lighter.

I invoked my skill.

To anyone else, it was a loser skill.

But to me, it was the best in the world.

I used movements imparted through close combat to get behind her. Amy hadn't been able to spot me, and immediately invoked Almelia's Magic Barrier when I vanished.

Amy, that skill is useful for attacks coming from the front and the sides, but is severely lacking in the rear.

I wreathed my left arm with all the mana I had to create a Magi Raegas.

"Hraaah!"

My hand pierced Amy's shield, destroying it, and then it passed through Amy.

Ah... Right... That earlier sequence of movements...

“Rush right up to them and crouch. When you think you’ve distracted them, get behind and do this! Want to try it out? Hah. You’re hopeless.”

I’d repeated it thousands of times until it came to me as easily as breathing.

It was the first assassination technique she taught me.

◆ Rila ◆

“Lord Rileyla!” Roje ran through the corridor and came to a stop on one knee.

When Rila, in her feline form, looked up at her servant, she understood the meaning in her expression.

The former demon lord’s heart skipped a beat.

Roje looked as she did whenever reporting a death during the Human-Fiend War. Rila had sensed something odd afoot, and had dispatched Roje to track Roland’s activities, just in case.

“The situation is very bad,” Roje stated.

Rila started running to the Gate set up within the castle.

Roje followed after, scooping up Rila and setting her on her head with a “Pardon me.”

“What do you mean by bad?” Rila questioned.

“A clash between him and the assassin targeting the hero. Neither of them are fit for battle now.”

“Then hurry.”

“Of course.”

Once they reached the Gate, Roje used her mana to teleport.

Unable to battle? Roland?

Rila could scarcely conceive of the notion, yet some part of her had expected this.

The atmosphere of the last few days felt like the prelude to a losing battle,

when one of Rila's subordinates decided to sacrifice himself.

Roje and Rila hurried toward a section in the slums. It was all the decrepit houses could do to remain standing.

The area felt deserted. Rila could not tell whether the humans had fled as soon as the battle began or if no one had been here to begin with, but she suspected the latter.

On the way, the pair found Almelia sitting with her back against a pillar.

"Almelia."

"Lord Rileyla, it seems she's only unconscious. He watched the hero fight against the assassin and waited for an opening."

"...He did not notice you were following him?"

"It seemed he could not afford to... She was a formidable opponent."

Roje rarely praised humans.

The elf recounted everything that had transpired to Rila as they followed the signs of battle through the town.

"Over there."

A small black puddle had formed under Roland. Rila realized it was blood immediately. Nearby, there was a woman lying on her side.

"Roland."

Rila leaped off Roje and ran to his side without giving the collapsed woman so much as a passing glance.

"Ah...Rila, it's you."

He looked haggard, bereft of strength. His voice was faint, and his face white as a sheet. He'd lost too much blood.

"We must tend to you quickly. Roje!"

"Yes!"

"Wait... Wait, please. It's not over yet."

Roland gritted his teeth and tried to stand. He tried to steady himself with his

right hand, seemingly forgetting it was gone, and lost his balance.

Rila felt chagrined that she couldn't lend him a shoulder.

"What do you mean it's not over? You have won, have you not?"

"I promised Amy."

Rila recalled that was the name his teacher often used.

Upon glancing at the woman, Rila saw she was still breathing, although only faintly.

"Her dream is for me...to kill her."

"Who cares about that?!"

It was difficult to tell if Roland was listening. He steadied himself, leaning his left arm against a pillar, and finally stood. His eyes meandered until they came upon his own right arm, lying on the ground. He then took the knife still clutched in the severed limb's hand.

"You have no obligation to fulfill a promise she forced upon you!"

He staggered forward one step at a time. Rila placed herself between him and Amy.

"You said it yourself at the house in the mountains. She is the parent who gave birth to the assassin you are."

"Yes," Roland rasped. He wasn't looking at Rila, instead focusing on moving forward, like a specter of the man he previously was.

"I cannot let you kill her..."

If Roland heard that, there was no indication. He was blind to Rila, and she was powerless to stop him in her cat form.

"Rila... This has nothing to do with you..."

"If she created the assassin you were, then it has everything to do with me."

They would have never met otherwise.

"She told me... She wants me...to put an end to her last moments..."

"How is killing your own parent *normal*?!"

The shout burst from her throat. A small noise issued from her collar—a tear.

“Lord Rileyla, your collar...”

No sooner had Roje commented on it than Rila’s surroundings filled with light, and the world grew wide. Shackles were coming free. Upon examining herself, Rila understood she’d returned to her original form. The collar Roland had put on her lay at her feet, but that wasn’t important now.

“I do not care who that woman is. You shall not kill her yourself.”

“Get out of the way, Rila...”

As Roland walked, Rila threw her arms around him.

His body, normally as sturdy as steel, had weakened. Anyone could have stopped him at this point.

“I cannot allow you to kill your precious recollections of yourself...”

His memories of his childhood.

His days of training. His dreams and ambitions.

His growth as an assassin.

All of that time was spent with the woman on the ground.

“You needn’t kill her,” Rila entreated. “You needn’t fulfill that promise. You are a guild employee.”

For some reason, Rila began to sob as she held Roland fast and squeezed his frail body.

Roland hung his head, resting it upon Rila’s shoulder.

“Yes...you’re right...,” he whispered into her ear, barely able to form the words. “I don’t need to anymore... I don’t need to kill anyone...”

He went limp.

Rila used the highest order of recovery magic she knew and stopped the blood still flowing from his shoulder. Roland’s breathing evened out, and Rila released a sigh. She gently wiped the blood from his face.

“Lord Rileyla...it seems you have recovered your mana,” Roje commented.

“...Indeed. The collar that kept it sealed away has broken.”

By all accounts, it should have been unbreakable, but such things were often said of antiques and rare curios. Perhaps it had simply reached its limit after having to hold back the mana of the most powerful demon lord of all time.

“Lord Rileyla, if you stay here, you will cause a commotion. I believe we should leave as soon as we can.”

“Quite right.”

Rila also cast recovery magic on Amy.

“Roje, take this woman, as well.”

“This human?” Roje asked incredulously.

“Mm-hmm. She is important to Roland.”

Roje agreed, although she looked unconvinced, and shouldered Amy.

Rila took a step, and a magic circle drew itself on the ground. “We shall go to the island,” she decided. “That should keep us from troubling the humans.”

“As you wish.”

Rila collected Roland’s severed arm. She knew of no way to reattach it after it had been away from his body for so long. Not even demonic magic could help this time.

However, a collar had contained a demon lord’s power, so perhaps there was a yet undiscovered method... Although, that collar had broken.

Rila trusted she’d find a way to mend his arm.

They headed to the island the remnants of the demon lord’s army used recently. Rila hadn’t visited this place since then.

The army doctor still lived here, but it seemed she was presently away.

“She did mention she occasionally leaves for research excursions. Perhaps that’s where she’s gone,” Roje speculated.

The two women left Roland and Amy in separate rooms within what had once been the barracks.

Roland still looked pale, but Rila was confident he'd pull through. She cast a preservation spell on his arm. That would stave off the rot as long as the magic lasted.

Rila peeked into Amy's room, which drew Roje's attention.

"What do you intend to do with this woman?" asked the elf.

"By your account, she possesses a truly dreadful skill, correct?"

"Yes, she can copy the skills of others and use them like they're her own..."

"How very useful..."

The assassin, Amy, was beautiful, even as she slept.

"Sh-she could become terrible competition for me..."

Rila stared at Amy resentfully. Thinking of how Roland had lived with this woman for years brought an unpleasant sensation to her chest.

"Maybe we ought to kill her, Lord Rileyla."

"No." Rila slapped Roje upside the head.

"Ow!"

"If I kill her for convenience now, she will win." Rila nodded to herself, as if to praise her comment. Roje, on the other hand, wondered at the meaning of the remark.

"I shall leave telling Leyte, Almelia, and Maylee to you, for I shall remain here to watch over them."

"As you wish."

Rila watched as Roje made to hurry back to Bardenhawk.

10

Return

“Oh, awake now, are you?”

I wasn't certain where I was. When I opened my eyes, I was met with Rila's face. I looked around and realized I was lying on her lap in an unfamiliar bed.

“Looks like I'm still alive,” I stated.

“All thanks to me,” Rila said. “You may thank me now.”

She looked smug.

“Where are we?”

“The island that those dissidents used as a base. The barracks, if you recall.”

“Yes. That was when you thought a stomachache meant you were pregnant.”

“D-do not speak of that...!”

I tried to get up, but swiftly lost my balance.

“There now.” Rila supported my right shoulder while I was caught by surprise. That's when I recalled what had happened.

“Right...”

My arm was cut off. The chance to mortally wound Amy was worth a limb, and the weight loss proved helpful in getting at her.

“You remember?”

“Yes. They feel like someone else's memories, but I won.”

“Indeed, you did.” Rila smiled and gently helped me back down, stroking my head.

The final blows hadn't been a fight between assassins. I'd broken all of Amy's teachings, which had undoubtedly surprised her. The moments following the

battle were vague, but I remembered speaking with Rila and saying it was very cold. That was probably because of the blood loss.

“You don’t have your collar. So back then...”

Rila’s voice had come from below until suddenly, she was right before my eyes and holding me in her arms.

She’d cried. I recalled that much clearly.

I hadn’t touched her collar, though, and before I left the castle, she was still in her cat form.

“Oh, ha-ha... It has broken.” Rila laughed nervously as she showed me the torn collar.

“According to an expert appraiser I met on my travels, it was supposed to be unbreakable,” I said.

“It seems there are exceptions to all things,” Rila replied.

“I guess you’re not the most powerful demon lord in history for nothing.”

“You yourself are far from average, too, considering you defeated me.” Rila grinned softly for a moment before launching into a series of questions. “Are you hungry? Do you feel all right? Would you like water?” She was incredibly doting.

“You’re not going back to Hell?” I asked.

“You released me from the shackles of being the demon lord. If you would like me to go home, then I shall.”

“...You can do as you please.”

“Mm-hmm. I most certainly will.”

Rila had probably left Bardenhawk and come to this island because the collar had broken.

“What happened to Amy, the woman I fought?”

“She is sleeping in a room near yours. She was quite injured and has yet to awaken.”

“I see.”

Three days had passed since the fight. I’d been sleeping the whole time.

Meanwhile, Rila had cast magic to seal Amy’s skill, a very difficult feat, judging by how she explained it. Such a powerful skill demanded a lot of work to render it inert.

“It took great effort, but she should be no threat to Almelia now.”

“That’s why you’re the demon lord,” I replied. “If you hadn’t had the collar on, I probably could have gone straight to you for help.”

“Such flattery.” Rila laughed bashfully.

I asked, “So what do you plan on doing? Are you going to hole yourself up here?”

“...That house was too small for me. I shall make this island my residence henceforth. And you shall commute to work from here, naturally.”

I doubted that was the truth. This was likely the only way for Rila to live away from Hell without causing problems for humans.

“We could find a way to repair the collar... I guess I’ll stay here until then.”

“You believe there exists someone who is capable of fixing it? Then I should like you to find them.”

“Well, that’s unexpected. I thought you found the collar limiting.”

“No... It was at first. But I believe it was proof, in a way.”

“Proof?”

“Mm-hmm. Proof you presented to me. Proof that I am not a demon lord.”

So that’s what it meant to her.

“There is no mistaking it. You killed the demon lord,” Rila added. When I stared at her, she turned red and looked away.

“A-and I suppose it was also a piece of jewelry to accessorize. Yes.”

While she was a cat, it was a collar, but in her proper form, it was closer to a choker. If she liked it, there was nothing more to discuss.

“Let’s fix it, then,” I decided.

Rila nodded. “And we shall also find a way to reattach your arm.”

“Do you think that’s possible?”

I wasn’t even sure where the limb was. As though to answer the question I hadn’t voiced, Rila retrieved it from beneath the bed.

It was definitely my arm... But it was giving a thumbs-up.

Did I really leave it that way?

“It’s preservation magic. So long as I do not break the spell, it shall never rot.” Rila adjusted the fingers to make a V with the pointer and middle.

So *she* was the culprit.

“Don’t play with it,” I chided.

Rila chuckled.

Despite the existence of necromancy, there were no known ways to reattach a body part.

“I am sure you are tired from talking. You may rest now.” With that, Rila left.

I looked at the ceiling and tried to remember the battle and what had come after.

Amy was still alive. I felt relief spread through my chest. I couldn’t quite put the feeling into words. Had Rila not been there, I likely would have killed Amy and died of blood loss myself.

It seemed that Roje had gone around telling everyone involved what had happened. They were all waiting to hear more after I woke up. Those at the guild were informed that I’d had an accident. Almelia and the others closer to the situation learned the full truth—that I’d lost my arm fighting.

“Lord Rileyla thought something was off,” Roje said. “So, on that day, she asked me to watch you to see whether you did anything strange. You should be grateful for her judgment and discretion!”

As usual, Roje sounded proud.

“If you were watching from an unseen place, you could have killed the hero and me,” I stated.

“...The war is over,” Roje answered. “And...after seeing such a sublime fight, I could not help but pay you and the hero respect for your efforts.”

Evidently, Roje hadn’t wished to sully the battle with guile. I guess the elf had her own sense of ethics.

Two days after waking, I found the strength to walk again. It still felt odd to be missing an arm, but I adapted quickly.

Amy was still unconscious. After Rila had gone to all that work finding a spell to seal off Amy’s skill, she’d admitted, *“If she does not wake, all my effort shall be for naught.”*

Roje used the Gate to bring a few visitors to the island: Leyte and Maylee; King Randolph and Almelia; Frank, Iris, and Milia. They all stopped by in turns, each clearly worried for me.

The only thing they asked of me was to consider when I should return to work. Honestly, I could handle daily tasks without issue now, but they were probably being considerate because of what I’d lost.

“Mr. Roland, we’re back home now and working at the Lahti branch,” Milia said, looking worried. She told me all about the recent events.

“Is that right?”

I hadn’t been away from my job for that long, yet guild work felt nostalgic now.

Our time in Bardenhawk had come to an end. I thought back on it. Everything started when I accepted that broadscale quest.

“How are things going? Do you think you’ll have any problems coming back to work?” Iris asked me directly.

“No, I can write with both my hands, so I can still manage,” I replied, just as straightly.

“That’s good.”

Losing that limb might have also robbed me of the part that made me an assassin.

“Hey, Rila’s mana... Does it feel a little eerie to you two?” I inquired.

Iris and Milia looked at each other.

“I don’t feel anything odd in particular?”

“Huh?”

“Yeah, I don’t, either. I saw Miss Prima Donna earlier, but it didn’t seem like there was anything odd...”

Rila’s mana had returned, but these two didn’t detect anything noteworthy. Come to think of it, I sensed nothing sinister from their power, either. It was as though Rila’s claws had been clipped.

Perhaps that spoke to some internal change? Now that she was no longer a demon lord, a weight lifted from her shoulders, and she became mentally whole, I suppose.

When I explained this to her, Rila seemed puzzled.

“A demon’s mana does not change. Not even through kinship with others. But...if Iris and Milia do not feel my mana...”

“Then you can go home.”

“Mm-hmm.”

We decided to move from the island back to our house on the outskirts of Lahti.



Today was my first day back at work.

I left in the morning, as usual, and said my hellos when I came in.

“Good morning.”

“Morning, Algan.”

“Roland, since you’ve been gone, none of the women adventurers have been coming in.”

As I joked with the other workers, I realized things were more lighthearted than I’d expected.

I felt at home, in a way. I spoke about nothing in particular with familiar faces and sat in my usual seat. When had this become such a part of me? A little farther away, I saw Iris with Milia and the other women in the office.

“Milia, hurry.”

“Wah...”

“Why do you sound like you’re about to cry...?”

Milia wiped her eyes with her arm as the others pushed her toward me.

“Mr. Roland.”

I noticed she was hiding something behind her back, only to realize it was a bouquet.

“Welcome home!”

I received the gift as she handed it to me with a smile. Then everyone clapped.

Maurey, who’d just barely made it in on time, was the only one who seemed out of the loop.

“Welcome home.”

“Tell me everything that happened in Bardenhawk later, okay?”

“Welcome home!”



“I’m looking forward to working with you again!”

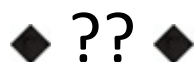
I had no idea how to respond. My mind went blank.

Still, I had to say something, and I finally found some words, a phrase. Speaking it caused my voice to tremble.

“...I’m glad to be home.”

Amy.

I had nothing, but now I have a place to return to.



The man made his way to an unnoteworthy town. In other words, to a *normal* town. It neither prospered nor suffered from poverty. It was as average as a place could be.

The Phantom Demon Lord Slayer had come to rest in this town and now worked as a guild staffer.

The man could not understand why such a person would bother with a life such as this.

He saw the slayer while passing by the guild once. The bespectacled legend seemed composed, almost at peace. It was as though he’d forgotten the many people he’d killed in secret.

And, just as the man had heard from others, the slayer had lost an arm.

At first, he’d meant to ask the slayer for help, but upon realizing the rumors were true, he determined that the former assassin was only a shadow of his past glory—hardly able to accomplish the necessary work.

The person the assassin lived with, the demon lord according to reports, had preserved the assassin’s arm with a spell.

Though learning that such magic existed was surprising initially, the man swiftly realized he could use the still-living arm as a substitute.

He found the woman walking along the road. He knew her from her features.

Her conspicuous red hair and eyes. Such glowing beauty set her apart from the landscape.

If she was on the road, it meant the house was empty.

Once he reached the home on the outskirts of town, he confirmed there was truly no one around. He peered in through the window and easily spotted the limb set upon a living room table.

Surely, it was the slayer's.

The door was unlocked when he tried it. It seemed they didn't bother bolting it since the house could be entered by force regardless.

Perhaps they'd trusted there was nothing of value to steal here, but the man saw it differently. He snuck inside and squirreled away the arm into his bag.

The man left town after retrieving the guild worker's limb while no one was the wiser.

Afterword

Hello. I'm Kennoji.

This volume brings the long Bardenhawk arc to a conclusion. Roland's fight with his teacher, his past, has finally ended, marking the first major story part's completion.

I wrote the final battle with Amy and the series of chapters up to it around August of last year. I remember drafting it at the exact pace that I imagined.

Personally, I like how the story flows.

I read through it before uploading it to the internet, but it was even more fun to do so again during the print check. *Wow, Kennoji did such a great job writing this last year*, I thought, as though another person was responsible.

I hope that you, the readers, also found the narrative satisfying.

The story will continue for a while yet.

The sixth volume will be about Roland's arm and Rila's collar. I hope you're looking forward to it.

Kennoji

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